NOVEL
01
WRITTEN BY
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MOB
Trapped in a
Dating Sim
The World of Otome Games
is Tough for Mobs

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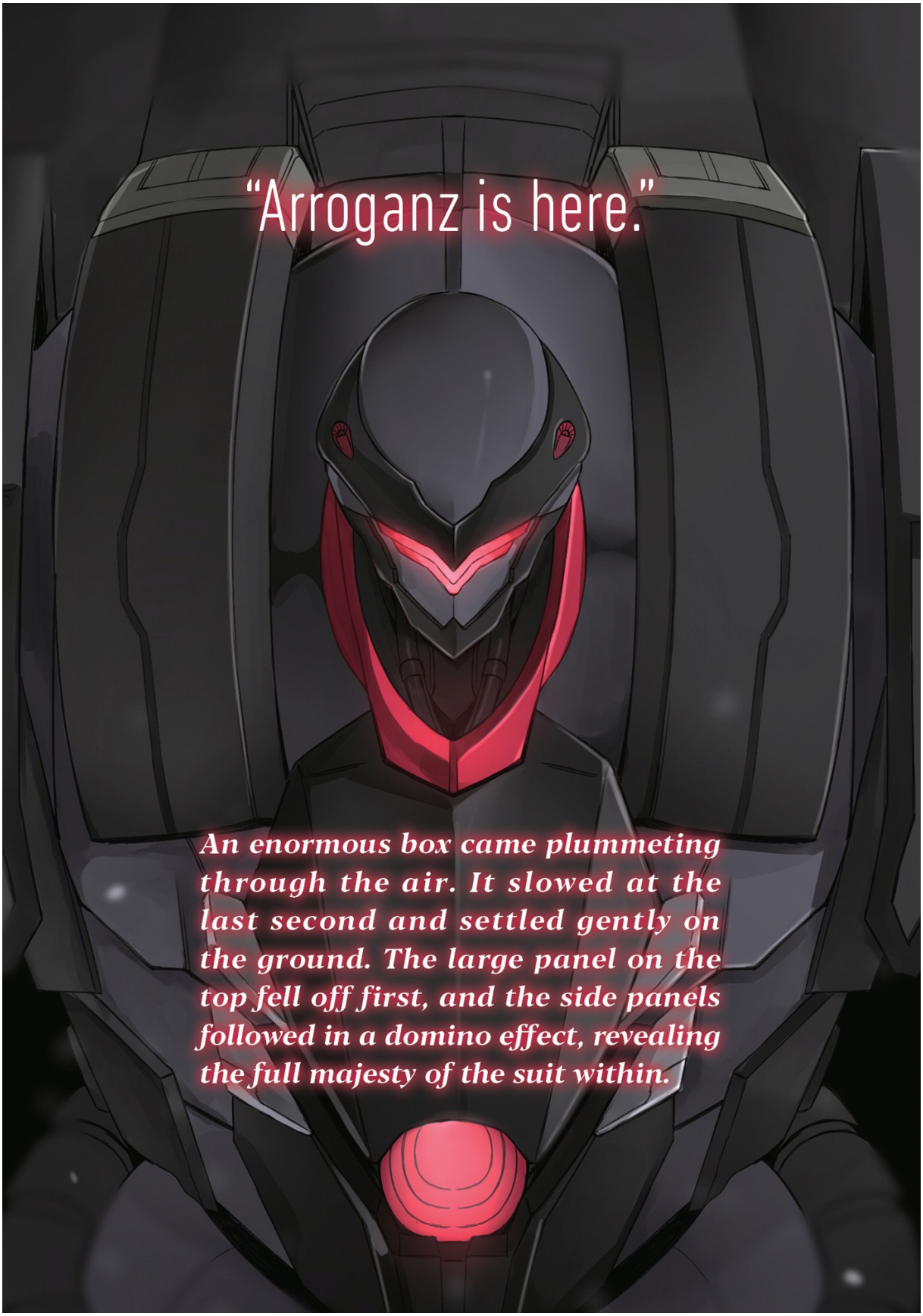
アホ
ハラグロ
ゲス
バカ

JULIUS
"Hurry up and tell me your conditions for this duel. I don't have all day."
"Uh, um..."
ANGELICA
LEON
(Who the hell is this background character? Why is he ruining my perfect plan?!)
"Um...what are you doing?"
OLIVIA
MARIE


“Arroganz is here.”
An enormous box came plummeting through the air. It slowed at the last second and settled gently on the ground. The large panel on the top fell off first, and the side panels followed in a domino effect, revealing the full majesty of the suit within.

Trapped in a Dating Sim
The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs

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01

WRITTEN BY
YOMU MISHIMA

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MONDA

Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM: THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS (LIGHT NOVEL) VOL. 1

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Illustrations by Monda

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Prologue

IDEAS LIKE GOOD AND EVIL are relative and differ based on point of view. Ordinarily, such philosophical pretension never crossed my mind, but I was beyond exhausted. Mentally, I was wiped. Emotionally, let's just say that my face had been devoid of all expression for hours.

What I really wanted to do was flop down on my bed and spend the rest of my meager time on Earth immersed in my favorite manga. Or maybe an anime. Playing a game wouldn't have been bad either, so long as it was one made for a male audience, i.e., me.

Unfortunately, I—a full-time employee and functioning member of Japanese society—was playing an otome game instead, my eyes dead-fish glazed. These dating sims were made principally for women. They featured female main characters with a bevy of male love interests to pursue. The opposite of these were galge—dating sim games targeted at men.

That's right. A man like me had no business spending his precious afternoon off on a game like this. Maybe if I genuinely liked otome games it would be a different story, but I exclusively preferred galge.

"Uggghhh, why do I have to spend my whole freaking day trying to rack up affection points with a bunch of dudes?"

The blushing man on-screen did absolutely nothing for me.

Of course, most of the characters in this game were some kind of gorgeous. A popular artist had done the character designs and sprites, and the cast was voiced by famous actors. If this were a galge and these were all female characters, I would have been crying with joy. But what was I supposed to do with this guy's husky voice?!

I wasn't playing this game for pleasure, so I was using a guide on my phone to clear it quickly. My eyes flitted between the game and the walkthrough as I made my selections. A cheery little sound echoed, indicating I had successfully raised my affection points with the idiot love interest I was currently pursuing. The character's 3D model struck a pose, his cheeks flushed as he pushed his hair back.

"You're not like all the other women," he said. "Tell me your name."

This man was some kind of prince, and he was oh-so-popular at the academy. The protagonist had encountered him by chance, and since she didn't know his true identity (gasp), she was treating him just like a normal person (gasp!) in this scene.

"What a load of bull," I couldn't help grousing. I'd already completed my first playthrough and this encounter was old news to me. "She's lying. We've been through this before. She totally knows who the prince is. I'm telling you, this protag is calculating. Conniving, even."

But no matter how I warned him, the prince was completely oblivious to her scheming.

“Acting all happy, blushing like a fool,” I grumbled at my screen. “This guy really has no taste.”

Work had been such a nightmare lately that it was my first weekend off in ages, and here I was throwing it all away playing this excruciating game. It was already Sunday afternoon. Seriously, why?

My phone chirped with an incoming message. When I checked it, I found a message from my sister with a picture attached: *I’m enjoying my time abroad with my friends!*

The photo showed her and her friends having the time of their lives on some hotel beach. Her smiling face made my blood boil.

I immediately replied: I call BS! You’re making me play this game for you because you said you were too busy to do it yourself!

The otome game presently sucking out my life force actually belonged to my little sister. She was a university student living at home with our parents, while I lived by myself. She had dropped by Saturday morning. I knew something was off the second I saw her, and lo and behold, she hadn’t come for the pleasure of my company.

All smiles, she said, “I’m sure you’ve got nothing better to do… How about full clearing this game for me?”

Full clear. In other words, complete 100 percent of the content in the game. Collect all the illustrated moments, animations, and scenes, so they could be viewed later through the menu. She was asking me to play through the entire game.

What I really wanted to tell her was, *Enough of your crap! Do it yourself!*

My phone dinged again with my sister’s reply: What the hell? You sure you want to take that attitude with me? Maybe when I come back I won’t sort out that whole misunderstanding with Mom. Come on, I’ll buy you a souvenir, just full clear the game for me, okay? Please? (FYI, if I get back and you haven’t done it, I’m going to leave even more naughty stuff in your room) ~ Sincerely, your cute little sister.

I had to suppress the urge to chuck my phone to the ground. “Damn her!”

I wanted to refuse her request, really I did. The problem was, my sister had surreptitiously stored some of her more dubious reading material at my place, since she still lived with our parents. Namely, the kind of books hardcore nerd girl fujoshi are into. She didn’t even tell me she’d done it. When my mom came to clean my apartment and found all that racy, homoerotic content carefully tucked away, she assumed it belonged to me. I tried clearing things up with her, but the harder I defended my real taste the more it sounded like I was trying to hide the truth.

It was a *nightmare*. Both because of the misunderstanding with my mom *and* because now I knew way too much about what my little sister was into. To make matters worse, my parents believed my sister’s lies over my protests. She was pretty, talented, and always got good grades. People often praised her for being kind and considerate. In reality, she was just

really good at wearing a mask, as I learned the hard way time and time again.

If you couldn't tell by now, my sister's personality sucked.

She made my life hell in order to hide her hobbies, and no matter how much I might try to convince our parents otherwise, they would never take my word over hers. When my mom first called about it, worried, I almost felt like crying. I vowed then and there that I would have revenge on my sister.

I swallowed my anger and the need to throw things, and set my phone aside. I reached for the controller again and tried to focus on completing the game so I could clear my good name.

There was only one path left to me: I had to see this game through to the end. Frustrating as it was, my sister had a way with words. When she showed up Saturday morning, she not only twisted my arm into playing her game for her, she also talked me into giving her extra cash for her trip. I felt pathetic for letting myself be blackmailed.

It was clear I didn't stand a chance of winning against her if I played fairly. I would have my revenge, though. And as I continued farming affection points in the game, I began concocting a plan.

"I'm going to make her regret pissing me off."

My little sister had always been cunning. She knew she was cute, and she knew how to use that to her advantage—the complete opposite of me. Her only weakness was probably this hobby she'd hidden from the rest of the world.

I stewed in frustration as I kept playing. My brows furrowed. "I keep getting stuck at this same spot…"

The creator of the game had clearly poured a lot of money into making this series, hoping it would be a hit. My sister was so enthralled with the artist and voice actors that she bought the first-press limited edition of the game the second preorders went up. But the game had a slight problem: there were roleplaying *and* strategy elements. The developers had only made games targeting men in the past, so this one was (unsurprisingly) missing the mark a little for their new, largely female audience.

The setting for the game was a whimsical fantasy world with swordplay and magic. Characters lived on chunks of land that floated in the air. You might think the civilization wasn't very advanced given the existence of royalty, but actually, people flew around in airships, and knights fought in mobile suits called "Armor."

The protagonist was attending the nobles' academy, although she was just a commoner. She was a plain girl from the countryside who'd received a scholarship. High-ranking noblewomen bullied her for her special status, and she had to contend with various other challenges as well.

And of course, the world in this otome game showed incredible favoritism toward women.

My little sister initially intended to clear the game herself but gave up when she couldn't best the strategy elements that originated in other game genres. Thus, I was suffering in her place.
"You're always playing these kinds of games," she'd said. "It should be a piece of cake for you."
True, I did enjoy video games, but even I found myself annoyed with the difficulty here.
"Who would even want these kinds of elements in an otome game anyway?" I grumbled as I worked the controller.
Airships were lined up on the screen, shaped like rugby balls, standing across from one another on the hexagonal grid of a battlefield. Each side would fire cannons at the other in a turn-based system, and then the knights, in their mobile suits, would fly in and charge the enemy.
"Shit! Why the hell does the enemy use its skill right then?! Makes it insanely hard to win." I glared at the screen. "They should have made it so players can speed through this stupid stuff."
My allies suffered enormous damage even when they attacked, due to the enemy's special abilities. Then, when it was the enemy's turn to go on the offensive, my units lacked sufficient defense. I got wiped out every time.
Even if my units had superior skills, a lot of random elements (hit chance, crit chance, etc.) still made winning difficult. I could make all the right moves, account for the best field positioning and terrain, and those pure RNG elements would still take me out.
No wonder my sister threw in the towel.
"Ah, crap," I groaned. One of the conditions for winning this map was to keep the prince alive, and the airship he was in had just gone down. The words *Game Over* popped up on the screen.
"Seriously, again?! How the hell can I lose when I'm following the walkthrough?"
I really wanted to tell my sister to give up on completing this. I wanted to tell her to download someone else's full-comp save files from the internet. But…the game had a certain feature where the characters would actually say aloud whatever you'd named the protagonist. My sister had used her own name—something about wanting to hear those famous voice actors whispering as if to her. Ergo, downloading someone else's data wasn't going to get her what she wanted. I had no choice.
"I'm so sick of this! The prince keeps dying!" A thought occurred to me. "Is that what the developers want? Are they trying to coerce me into microtransactions, is that it? You want my money that bad?!"
For an offline game, this one had a wide selection of extra paid content. Players could purchase special items to make the battles easier to get through. I wasn't sure if it was to placate complaints that the game was impossible to beat or if the developers were just being calculating.
I didn't want to spend more money than I already had for my stupid sister, but there was no denying that the strategy elements were sucking up all my

time. Everything else was the same as any galge. As long as I followed the guide and got all the right answers, I'd have no problems clearing it.
I took a break from playing to look at the paid content—which was plentiful. Most of the stuff sold for about a hundred yen a piece, but the battle items, such as the airships and mobile suits, were more like three to five hundred yen, some even as high as eight hundred.
"These extra fees are precisely what killed this company's reputation," I noted. It had been a heavily anticipated release, but players soon criticized the game for being unbeatable without paid items. The outrage prompted the company to lower prices in their online store within a month of its release. I still thought the items were expensive, though.
As I browsed, I noticed one of the items was a men's swimsuit. Exasperating. "No thanks, I don't wanna see a dude in a Speedo."
Granted, if this were a galge, I'd probably buy every single item just to see all the girls in *their* swimwear.
"Guess there's not much difference between men and women, huh?" I chuckled weakly, feeling drained.
It was personally way uncomfortable to think about female players enjoying guys waiting on them half-naked. But really, games and anime had a lot of situations like that. If it was a male character surrounded by a bunch of women, it was called a harem; if it was a female character surrounded by a bunch of men, it was a reverse harem.
"Wonder if girls feel the same way about harems as I do about reverse harems?" The fact that I was even giving such a thought serious consideration was proof I was utterly beat.
"Eh, not like it matters." I needed to focus on finishing up this game. "Okay, so what do I need to buy to beat this thing?"
All the paid content items were powerful. There were exclusive weapons for the male characters and equipment for the protagonist. Personally, I wanted something that would serve me well in battle; cosmetics could suck it. As long as I could beat the game, I didn't give a crap how it looked.
"Oh, how about this?"
My eyes landed on the most expensive item of the bunch: a battleship. It didn't require resupplying and it ignored all of those annoying RNG battle elements. Most importantly, it was a super strong unit.
"Although it looks more like a spaceship than an airship," I mused.
Its metallic exterior had a completely different aesthetic than the other airships in the game. It was enormously powerful, living up to its thousand-yen price tag. I gave the description a brief glimpse and saw it was an ancient blah blah blah… TL;DR: It was a prodigiously powerful spaceship.
"Wait, so it really *is* a spaceship? That has to be a typo, right?"
Had someone messed up when they wrote the item description? Frankly, it didn't matter as long as I was able to clear the game. At this point, I'd buy whatever just to get through.

Next, I checked out the Armor for sale. Well, that's what they were called. They didn't *look* like regular armor, more like giant robots. Even so, the men who donned Armor to fight were known as knights.
Did women really enjoy watching men fight for them?
Well, can't hurt to purchase this, too.
The black armor almost looked like an enemy unit, it was so imposing, but that didn't bother me. Being the dark hero was badass. Come to think of it, this was actually a pretty cool design for something in an otome game. And it was going to have *so* much more combat utility than those stupid love interests.
Like, one was a swordsman who was amazing in duels but possessed no long-range weapons; another was a guy who thought it was weak to rely on anything but pure skill, so all of his equipment was outdated and flimsy; and a third was skilled magic user who was about a total glass cannon that would shatter the second an enemy unit so much as sneezed in his direction.
These pointless jerks had been the cause of a long, long series of *Game Over*s.
"Ugh. I've gotta do it. I've gotta finish this game." I'd lost enough of my sweet, sweet weekend as it was. I broke down and purchased the spaceship and the dark Armor.
After equipping them and restarting the entire adventure sequence, I hit the ninety-percent-completion mark by that evening. I was a master of efficiency, racking up affection points and blazing through the daily events with each love interest. I sold all the gifts they gave me to the secondhand shop right away, *and* I did it while the dude in question was still in my party. Sure, selling a gift right in front of the guy who gave it made me a jerk too, but it was a game, so who cared?
Of course, if this were a galge, I'd totally go out of my way to make sure the girl was off my team before I got rid of her gift. Game or not, I couldn't be a douche when it came to girls.
But this was my sister's otome game. All that mattered was clearing all the content. Now all that was left was getting the ending where the protagonist dated the whole cast of male characters at once. This was the game's true storyline, the canonical true ending.
I didn't give a crap what they called it. When I finally achieved the reverse-harem ending, I felt two things: joy at being released from my servitude and hollow from how much time I'd wasted. I watched the final video play and simmered with anger…then sadness.
"That's two whole days of my life I'll never get back."
I saved the data, having kept my promise to my little sister, then collapsed on my bed. When I glanced at the clock, I realized it was a little soon to be going to sleep. I had no desire to move whatsoever, but with the freedom that came from finishing the game, I realized I was hungry. I pressed a hand over my stomach. Breakfast was the last thing I'd eaten.

“And there’s nothing in my fridge.” I’d originally planned to spend the day restocking groceries, but instead I’d prioritized that stupid game. “Guess I can hit up a diner.”

I double-checked the time on my phone and noticed a message from my little sister: Today was so much fun. I’m beat! I’ll be back home in a few days, so make sure to clear the game by then. If you don’t take me seriously, you’ll be a pervert in our parents’ eyes forever! lol

“She really is a piece of work.” Making me do her grunt work while she went out of her way to emphasize how much she was enjoying herself. Speaking of, one little thing bothered me about all that.

“How’d she get the money to go on a trip?”

The little bit of spare change she extorted out of me wouldn’t have been enough to cover the whole thing. And no way did she have any kind of part-time job. She couldn’t stay out late for work anyway, since our parents gave her a curfew. Plus, she’d whined about not wanting to work. She had too much pride to do anything illegal for cash.

Then I recalled what Mom had told me not too long ago, and a light bulb turned on in my head. “She said my sister needed money for a class to earn her license.”

My parents had assumed she meant a driver’s license and given her the funds without question. That had to be what she was using to finance her overseas adventure.

I immediately copied her texts and the pictures she’d sent me, then sat down at my laptop and sent a message to our mom, attaching the evidence. “That idiot. This is what she gets for blackmailing me.”

What would my parents think when they saw the truth and realized she’d not only blackmailed me but used their money to go overseas without permission? She couldn’t weasel her way out of this now. I’d ripped the sheepskin off the wolf.

I grinned triumphantly…until I goddamn realized.

“Wait. So I could have exposed her from the very beginning without wasting all that time on her stupid game?! Ugh, just kill me now.”

Disgusted at myself and still hungry, I stood, reaching for my wallet. The whole business with my little sister could be put on hold until I had a chance to eat. At any rate, I didn’t need to worry about that godawful otome game anymore.

I stepped out the front door feeling strangely light, almost as if I were floating. It was the same kind of happiness you might get leaving work after a hard day.

“I think I’ll splurge a little tonight. Really treat myself.”

I made my way along an oddly empty road, streetlights flickering eerily, then started down a set of stairs. That was when the dizziness hit.

“Aw, crap.” I grabbed for a railing. “This isn’t good.”

I fell.

It was like I was a marionette, and all my strings had been cut. My strength was *gone.* I watched helplessly as the ground came closer, anticipating the pain of hurtling down the stairs…and all I could think of was how I'd lost my precious weekend to my sister, and *now* I was probably going to die.
God, I was pissed.
Right then, my vision shifted. Was my life flashing before me? But no…I'd never seen anything like this before.
A land floating over ocean. Airships soaring above me. Blue skies and white clouds. My own hand reaching out toward the sun.
"It'd be too…pathetic…to die like…this…"
And then my consciousness faded.

***

The gentle embankment was blanketed with long green grass. I could hear it rustle as it moved, smell it as I drew in a breath.
I, Leon Fou Bartfort, was sprawled out across said embankment with a hand raised up toward the sun. My heart thundered furiously in my chest, and I was covered in a cold sweat. My chest ached; I felt sick.
"Wh-what the hell was that?"
I sat up so fast I ripped blades of grass right out of the ground. The wind was strong, blowing leaves and grass all around, and then a shadow crept over me, blocking out the sun.
It was an airship. A square wooden box flying high above me. Normally, I would have viewed it with disinterest—they periodically visited our territory—but today I couldn't contain my shock as my eyes widened in disbelief. It was like I was seeing one for the very first time.
I slapped a hand over my chest as my heart continued to pound. My breath was still coming in gasps. I stood, my eyes following the airship as it zipped across the open ocean.
Something about the ocean seemed…off.
"What the…? What is…?"
I tried to move forward but my legs tangled beneath me and sent me back to the ground. Glancing over myself, I had the odd idea that my legs and hands were strangely…small. I had no doubt this was *my* body, but it seemed to have…shrunk?
Some things are too much to think about. Instead, I decided to investigate what I'd noticed a moment ago. I stood and walked slowly toward the ocean with my child-sized legs, my heart humming with unease.
A fence prevented anyone from falling over the edge, but the sight from there was the same as always. I was standing on a mass of land that drifted over a salty body of water.
"That's right," I reminded myself. "Our island is floating."
I wasn't sure whether to be happy or sad once I remembered that this was "normal." Were islands supposed to float?

Had I somehow forgotten? Was that why I felt… I didn't know. Something had felt strange since the moment I caught myself lifting my hand up toward the sun. In that split second, it had felt like my whole life—or rather, another person's life—had flashed before my eyes. There was nothing particularly special about it, but he had seemed happy. And it had felt too vivid, too raw for it to just be a dream. Yet I couldn't even remember his name.

I cradled my head in my hands. The memories were still so pristine. …

Except for the name.

I was only five years old, yet I knew I had experienced something far beyond my years.

I sank down onto my butt as the memories from my current life and the memories I had just recalled seemed to merge together in my head. I pressed my back against the fence and gazed up at the sky.

"What…happened to me?"

I didn't even know who I was asking.

***

The sun was beginning to set, so I headed back to my house. I remembered disliking the place, which was why I'd run off to the embankment in the first place. Still, I wanted to return before dark. I steeled myself before walking into the entrance hall. My dad was waiting just inside the entrance, his arms crossed and his legs spread out wide beneath him.

"Idiot boy!" He smacked me over the head with his enormous fist.

Tears sprang to my eyes and I slapped my hands over my head. Behind me, the front door swung open. I looked back to see my mom walk inside behind me.

"So you've finally come back," she said. "Why must you run away like this on a day when the mistress is set to return?"

My dad, Balcus, was a liege lord—a baron. When I thought of nobles, my mind summoned the image of extravagant clothing on a slender form. Or maybe someone more…rotund? But my dad was neither; he was all muscle with a bearded jawline. His clothing consisted of a simple shirt, brown trousers, and boots. He didn't look the part at all.

My mom, his lover, was named Luce. She was a daughter of one of the knight families that owed allegiance to Bartfort House. Like my father, she wore the type of working attire you might expect of a villager, rather than the dress of a lady.

The *mistress* she spoke of was my father's official wife.

"I-I'm…sorry."

My parents eyed me, as if realizing something had changed in their son. But before they could say anything—or drag me off where I belonged—the door to the front door swung open again, and a woman wearing a dress adorned with jewels entered the manor.

The mistress, Zola Fia Bartfort.
At the sight of me, her gaze turned chilly. Her two children, Rutart (the oldest son of the house) and Merce (the oldest daughter) were close behind her. They also wore expensive outfits, unlike me. Last to follow was a tall, beautiful man in a suit. He had long, pointed ears and seemed to sneer at us.
“Honestly,” the mistress said. “Children with no proper education are little better than beasts.” With her narrowed eyes and her hair pulled back in a tight bun, she perfectly fit my archetypal image of a noblewoman.
My mom apologized, and my dad hauled me outside immediately. As he manhandled me toward the storage shed out back, his lips drew taut, but he didn’t say more until we reached it. “Think about what you’ve done,” he told me at last. “I’ll see that your food is brought by later.”
I could only nod.
Someone else was already inside the shed: the second oldest brother of the family, Nicks. He was two years my senior and wore the same kind of outfit as I did. He was reading by lantern light.
When my dad and I came inside, Nicks regarded me with exasperation. “You really are an idiot. Just bear with it a few days and they’ll be gone.” His eyes turned back to his book.
My dad pressed a hand to his head. “Nicks, help Leon study.”
Nicks gave him a perturbed look but cleared off space at the desk and carried another chair over. Once I took my seat, he warned me, “If you doze off, I’ll smack you.”
My dad waited until I nodded in agreement, then he left.
Once it was just the two of us, Nicks sat across from me, picked out a book he thought I could read, and passed it over. Its pages had seen so much use it was nearly falling apart, but I opened it anyway. Scribbles decorated the interior.
It was a strange feeling to be trying to read in a storage shed, swatting away bugs that gathered around the lantern.
As I tried to study, some language I didn’t know flitted through my head, its writing system completely different from what was on the page in front of me. In fact, that other tongue seemed somehow easier to parse.
I puzzled over this, until my brother seemed to decide I was stuck on an unfamiliar word. “Try thinking about it by yourself first,” he said. “If you can’t figure it out on your own, then I’ll help you.”
Silence lapsed between us. The insects buzzing around the lantern were a distracting annoyance.
“Hey, bro?”
He seemed startled. “Did you just say ‘bro’? You were calling me Nicks just this morning.”
Flustered, I tried to correct myself, but he beat me to the punch. “Trying to act more grown up now, huh? Eh, it’s fine. What did you need help with?”

I shook my head and tried to figure out how to say what was on my mind. I was beginning to have doubts about all the things that had seemed so normal to me before: like how Nicks and I were being treated. I understood why the heir to our family was given special regard, but why were we being shooed off to the storage shed? We had other siblings—older and younger sisters. Why weren't any of them out here with us? They weren't legitimate children, either.

"Why are we the only ones out here in this damn shed?" I asked finally.

My brother mumbled to himself, something about how I usually spoke with more reserve. But he put his book down on the table and stared up at the ceiling. "Because the mistress hates us, that's why," he said at last.

"Because we're Mom's—uh, *Mother*'s kids?"

Nicks folded his hands behind his head, leaning back in his chair. "You think there's any other reason? Even though our sisters are illegitimate, she still hesitated to force them out here. But for boys like us? This is just how it is."

Even at seven years old, my brother apparently had a lot to be dissatisfied with. He proceeded to explain—really, complain about—our house's circumstances.

The Bartforts weren't a true noble family, but they did technically hold their own territory: this floating island. Formerly, they had been a knight family, a baronet actually, just a step below a baron, and they had lived in relative harmony. Vassal families cultivated the land and welcomed knights without a lord to protect them. As a result, the population expanded, and the number of fields that required tending increased. Likewise, the number of people the land could support also grew…which was decidedly *not* a good thing, according to Nicks.

During our grandpa's time, an agent from Holfort Kingdom came to our territory and decided it was large enough to be recognized as a barony. When they informed my grandpa they would be elevating his rank, he panicked.

Knowledge from my previous life caused me to question this reaction. Wasn't becoming a baron something to be happy about? Elevating someone's noble rank was basically like a promotion. But shouldn't it be based on some sort of achievement, like exploits on the battlefield? Could you really be rewarded just for the size of your land and the number of people in it?

"Why didn't he want a higher status?" I asked.

Nicks seemed a bit unsure himself, but he said he could tell by our dad's tone when he told the tale that it wasn't something to be happy about.

"Grandpa complained that it was too sudden. Plus, your offerings to the crown have to be proportionate to your rank. That's why we're so poor."

More knowledge from my previous life filled in the gaps in my understanding. Some houses barely managed to reach the level necessary to be recognized as baronies, while others easily surpassed the minimum

requirements. The latter had no issue paying their taxes to the kingdom, but the former strained to meet the mark.
A lot of baronets who could very well be regarded as a barony for their size and population kept their mouths shut to avoid notice.
At any rate, our isolated island in the countryside had become a barony. The position demanded that our house conduct itself in a way appropriate for its new title, and so my dad was forced to marry a woman of high standing.
“Dad and the mistress are married, right?” I said. “How come she doesn’t stay here with us?” She and her two children only came to visit occasionally.
“That’s pretty normal for any lady born to a family of higher rank than baron,” Nicks said. “Sucks, doesn’t it? If you’re going to get stuck with a wife, it would be better to marry someone from a baronet house or lower. Well, then again, women from higher ranking houses wouldn’t even look twice at us.”
“So that’s normal?” I clarified.
“You’d better study while you can. If you can’t get hitched while you’re at the academy, you’ll be a late bloomer and get stuck marrying some older lady. You don’t want to be single when you’re twenty, right?”
I couldn’t hide my surprise. I knew about the academy, of course, but hearing *late bloomer* as something derogatory toward men? Normally women were the ones who were told that if they didn’t end up married by a certain age, they’d be a spinster.
I paused. “Nicks?”
“‘Bro’ is fine, I don’t care. What is it?”
“What do you mean when you say we could get stuck with some older woman?”
He cocked his head at me. “Exactly what I said. You’ll get married to a widow, someone who couldn’t get married in the first place, or someone whose man ran out on her. A lover isn’t going to cut it. It’s not honorable. That’s why a lot of young guys get shipped off to grandmas.”
My brother was frightfully mature for his age.
“But isn’t it usually the opposite?” I pressed. “Aren’t men usually at the top of society?” The memories of my past life insisted that men were dominant —something something patriarchy? Apparently that was wrong.
“Come on, all you have to do is look at our dad to know women are on top. You saw it for yourself. He can’t even stand up to that wench—err, the mistress.” Clearly Nicks found her unpleasant. “You know, you’re acting kinda strange today.”
I forced a smile before returning my attention to the book on the table. Cold sweat beaded my forehead. The bizarre memories of my past life continued to insist that something was off about this one.
This is weird. This world is straight-up weird.
For a while, I read in silence, but I was mulling over what Nicks had told me. It felt like I’d heard his story somewhere before.

“Academy… Holfort Kingdom? And the mistress’s servant was an elf? Wait a minute. Don’t tell me…”
My brother chastised me. “What are you muttering about?”
“U-um, that dude in the suit. That elf—he was the mistress chick’s lover, wasn’t he?” The manner of speech from my memories slipped out.
Nicks didn’t seem to care. Actually, he seemed exasperated. “Quit asking stupid questions and get back to studying.”
She had a demi-human—an elf—as her servant/lover… I knew this setup. In fact, I remembered it vividly.
I slumped over, my forehead smacking the top of the desk. “This is that stupid otome game.”
My memories, which had seemed muddled and murky before, suddenly felt sharp and clear. This was the world of that fluffy, romantic dating sim.
Nicks slapped me over the head with his open palm. “Don’t sleep! Seriously, what’s wrong with you today? Did you hit your head?”
I lifted my chin and gave him a forced smile, my lips stretched over my teeth.
He recoiled with surprise. “Wh-what is it?”
“This world is completely insane.”
“Uh, yeah, I guess so?” He seemed at a loss for how to respond. Perhaps to avoid talking any further, he turned back to his book.
I never dreamed I would experience reincarnating in another world. Sure, fantasy and magic and swordsmanship didn’t sound so bad, but it had a matriarchal society? I couldn’t have been reincarnated into a more normal civilization?
I cradled my head in my hands. “This suuuuuuucks!”
“What the heck is wrong with you!” Nicks fussed. “Shut up already!”
I, Leon Fou Bartfort, was a Japanese man reincarnated into the world of an otome game. Give me a freakin’ break!

Chapter 1:
A Reason to Fight

TEN YEARS PASSED in the blink of an eye after I regained my memories. I spent my days fuming that such a lighthearted otome game was actually a world full of wickedness, and it had become my reality.

Well, it wasn't like I could stay angry *all* the time. Though it was another world, it still had its own daily rhythm.

We were indeed nobles, but we were poor countryside stock. We often toiled in the fields ourselves, and naturally, I helped out. Manual labor toned my body over the years. My face grew more masculine as well, and it once again resembled the one I'd had in my previous life.

At fifteen, with black hair and black eyes, I was no stud, but I wasn't an ugly gremlin either. Sadly, this was an otome game world. Dreamy guys swarmed the place, and I was just one of the masses. A background character. A mob.

My older brother Nicks had moved to the continent—the main area of the kingdom—to enroll in the academy and live in the dormitory. As soon as he left the cramped storage shed we shared, the sixth youngest of the family (the fourth son), Colin, took his place.

Currently I was in my room reading a letter Nicks sent me. We were close like that (or at least, *I* thought we were close). *Looking for a bride is tough,* he noted.

In this world, a man who couldn't get married by the time he graduated the academy was considered deeply flawed. Still single by the age of twenty? You were second-rate goods. Society came down especially hard on the sons of noble families. Commoners might be given a pass, but noblemen who didn't marry young were treated like pariahs. As I read his letter, I prayed Nicks would find a wife quickly. For men, this world was ridiculously harsh.

If you couldn't get married, it affected employment, like your prospects for promotion. This held true even among the nobles. Second and third sons and onward had to leave the house and strike out on their own. They were merely spares, anyway, in case the heir failed to continue the family name. And once the heir inherited the family titles and produced a male child of their own, those spares became useless.

When that happened, our jobs were already predetermined: we either entered the military or became government officials. There were some exceptions, such as men who became doctors or something else that would benefit the country and the people in it. All other forms of employment were treated with disdain.

The men who couldn't marry were forever no better than a servant class. They had no hope of climbing a career ladder and would never be given any

significant responsibility. Society didn't trust those who couldn't marry. Therefore, marriage was critical for men, especially those of rank.
"This world truly is despicable," I muttered as I read Nicks's letter. Conflict defined our era—wars, squabbles, air pirates, monsters—and the death rate for knights and other men in the military was high. Noble houses like mine produced so many children because a lot of them inevitably died during war. And yet, while fighting was a man's job—all while holding down a paying job, come on!—women held all the authority. Men put their lives on the line and died in combat but were still garbage in the eyes of society. It was twisted and warped.
I hoped there was a reason for it. If this world only allowed women to get away with all this crap because of some developer's offhand decision to make the game's society matriarchal, I'd cry.
Why did I have to reincarnate *here*? There wasn't a day I didn't wonder that.
Wait, no, there were some days. A lot, actually. I was so busy that I often forgot to begrudge my situation. After all, it had been ten years since I regained the memories of my previous life. You get used to things.
Inside our little storage shed, my younger brother Colin sprawled out on his bed, sleeping soundly. He had such an innocent face. From the game's standpoint, he and I were nothing more than useless background characters. If we even got names, they would be Character A, Character B… I'd never even heard of Bartfort House in the game.
"So I'm a background character." I sighed. "I guess it does kinda fit me."
I didn't want to accept it, but part of me did anyway. It wasn't like I held any grand aspirations or wanted to move up in the world or do anything worthy of note. If I was just a background character, then a background character I would be.
More importantly, I would be enrolling in the academy next year. One of the few perks of this world for men (and trust me, there were very few) was that all nobles could join the academy. I was a little apprehensive about the idea of the game's story becoming real life for me, but I was grateful for the opportunity to study so I could advance in the paths available to me. With so few opportunities to leave your family's territory, this was a precious chance. If you didn't leave, you were likely to be forced into an engagement with some thirty- or forty-year-old has-been. No laughing matter.
"When you think about that, enrolling in the academy sounds pretty great."
I watched my little brother sleep, relieved I'd be escaping soon.

***

"A…a marriage interview? What in the world?!"
Just after supper, I was in my dad's office, and the mistress, Zola Fia Bartfort, revealed her intent to marry me off. My dad sat in his usual chair, grimacing.

I gaped at the personal information sheet he'd just given me. It listed the details of my potential marriage partner, complete with a portrait of her.
"Zola prepared the engagement." My dad looked uneasy as he glanced between the mistress and me. "The woman is an acquaintance of hers, looking for a new husband."
Zola sipped at her tea, the highest quality our house stocked. "Hmmph. Cheap tea leaves simply don't suit my taste," she muttered.
"No." I would not concede on this. "This is ridiculous!"
The woman in question was horrendous. According to the information sheet, she was the daughter of a baron in name only (she had no house to inherit), she had been married seven times now (a big red flag!), and she was over fifty. All of her *children* were older than me.
Zola slammed her cup down and pinned me with a glare. "She has always looked after me with utmost care and diligence. Furthermore, she's a young lady of a noble family of the court, one that has faithfully served the crown for many years. What could you possibly be dissatisfied with?"
What could I possibly be dissatisfied with?! Maybe Zola really was a moron. Anyway, what part of fifty years old meant young lady?
"I haven't even enrolled in the academy yet," I argued, "so why is marriage even coming up?"
Nobles generally married right after they graduated. If anyone tried to get married during school—or forewent it altogether—they were seen as juvenile and immature. The only exceptions were political marriages or weddings that, for whatever reason, had to be sped up. Still, most people didn't move past engagement until after graduation.
"I can accept enrolling a second son in the academy, but there's no point in doing that for a third!" Zola hissed furiously. "Even if you stay here, you'd end up costing us money."
I sneered at her.
"I feel bad it's come to this," my dad began apologetically, "but she's right that our house is low on funds. Still, you could always marry *after* enrollment." He sneaked a glance at her, but I knew she wouldn't listen to him no matter what he said.
Zola leaned back in her seat. "I'm sure he wouldn't get any notable work even if he did happen to graduate. It's only right for you to marry for the sake of your family. You should be grateful I've set you up with a partner. I even worked it out so you'll have a job in the military. You'd best put in some effort."
That was when I realized…
She intends for me to die in battle.
A pension was paid out to the families of men who fell in combat. For commoners, that came in the form of a lump sum, but for nobles it went a bit different. They earned honors for defending their country, and their family received a yearly compensation. On her information sheet, Zola's

friend proudly listed all seven of her previous husbands as having died an *Honorable Death in the Line of Duty*.
This engagement was a setup for me to die in the military so she could earn more glory and keep up a steady flow of cash.
“No way,” I said. “I refuse.”
Zola slapped her hand on the table and stood. “Enough! A lowly brat like you has no right to mouth off to me! If you’re truly a man, work for your family!”
This from a woman who spent most of her days in a manor my dad had set up for her in the royal capital, complete with a hefty allowance. She hailed from one of the noble families that worked in the palace and didn’t want to leave the capital. That’s right. Even though things were tight at home financially, my dad still sent her money, and she had the audacity to act like this. It would damage my dad’s reputation if he were to cut her off, however. He couldn’t divorce her even if he wanted to.
I racked my brain for a way to get out of this.
Come on, remember? I’ve got extra knowledge about this world! I was always beat after a day’s work and so never really tried to use my knowledge of the game to affect my life, but it was clearly time for that to change.
“So as long as I have money,” I began slowly, “you have no complaints?”
Zola snorted. “Oh? That’s an awfully arrogant attitude for a parasite who’s never earned a coin in his life.”
I wanted to shake her. A woman who leeched off Bartfort House while she lived the high life in the capital had no right to call me a parasite.
“We can’t refuse,” Zola went on, “it would offend her. If you think earning enough to cover your academy enrollment fees will cover it, you’re being naive.”
My dad looked unsure. An engagement you couldn’t refuse was out of the ordinary, even for a matriarchal society. Still, he couldn’t be too assertive with Zola. “Leon is still young. There’s no reason to rush—”
“I don’t want to hear any more! No one is going to want him once he’s older than twenty. You should be thanking me for finding him a partner while he’s still young. Instead, you want to whine and quibble over details.” Zola turned to me. “This is exactly why I *hate* countryside brats like you!”
Come now, the countryside didn’t do anything to you.
I tried to protest, but my dad intervened. “Try to think of this from Leon’s perspective. No one would want their first wife to be over fifty. That’s an almost forty-year age gap.” He breathed a sigh. “If he’s able to get the money, will you agree to drop this engagement?”
Zola sank back down into her seat, crossed her legs, and shot me a mocking look. “Oh? You never told me he was resourceful enough to make that kind of money. If that’s the case, I’d love for you to increase the allowance you send me.”

I won't say I'm convinced all the women in this world are like her, but man, does she try a person's patience.
My image of the women in this world, particularly the noblewomen, was absolutely horrible.
My dad scrubbed his face with his hand. He looked down at the ground and seemed to squeeze out the words. "Give us a little bit of time. We'll get the money."
I felt guilty he was overextending himself on my account. He was so miserable.
This world truly was despicable.

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After Zola left the room, it was just my dad and me. And I exploded.
"She made us send a ship to fetch her for something as stupid as this? How long does she think it took us to make all the preparations for her to stay here?" A regular service airship ran back and forth between our island and the capital, but for her to visit, we had to arrange her meals and accommodations and pay her travel fees. "Dad, why did you marry that… *thing*?"
He was too timid. Although there was a reason for that.
"Don't get mad. I *had* to. The other nobles wouldn't treat us with the proper respect otherwise, and that's not something to take lightly."
From my dad's point of view, it was incredible that Zola had even agreed to marry into a house on the fringes of the kingdom—on an outlying island, no less. Noble ladies born on the outer edge usually found spouses in the capital they so yearned to live in. A few women weren't quite so picky, but men tended to quarrel over who got their hand. Thus, just as Zola thought herself gracious for being willing to marry my dad, my dad likewise felt grateful for her generosity.
That just went to show the importance of a marriage partner. If a baron couldn't snag a high-status wife, he as good as declared his house socially impotent. Other noblemen would look down on him, and some might even start a war with his house. Everyone would treat him as if he were undeserving of his rank. He would be ostracized.
"Dad… Do we really not have the money for the academy?" I asked.
The answer seemed obvious when my dad pulled a face. "It'll be rough. We have debts to pay, too. Trying to squeeze out any more will put us further in the hole. But why did she bring this up all of a sudden?" Dad seemed as puzzled as me.
"Yeah…why didn't she didn't bring it up with Nicks?"
My dad tilted his head, considering. "Well, both you and Nicks have far too much of an age gap with Zola's friend regardless…but it *is* still strange. It's almost like she doesn't want you to go to the academy at all."

The whole thing bothered me, so I wrote up a letter to my brother to check with him and see if he knew anything. Basically, *There's all this engagement talk here at home, are things all right there?*
His answer was a surprise I could never have anticipated.

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A week later, I was in the storage shed, taking out the weapons stashed inside. These were also a part of my family's assets, so when my dad saw me trying (and struggling) to use them years ago, he'd gotten angry with me. No one could stop me now.
I found an old-style rifle with a magazine that held five rounds. I took the most functional-looking pieces out of the bunch and began disassembling them for maintenance. I also took down a sword that had been hung as a decorative piece to test its durability and gathered various other things necessary for my mission.
Dad watched with unease. "Here now, what are you planning?"
After Nicks's letter arrived, I resolved myself. Originally, I'd had the rather optimistic idea to use my knowledge of the game to earn some extra coin, but now that I knew the reality of my situation, I couldn't be so lackadaisical about it.
"Before she sells me to that perverted hag, I'm going to do whatever I can to earn some cash!" I said. "There's no way I'm getting married. No way in hell!"
Behind Dad, Mom watched with tears in her eyes.
The house Zola wanted to sell me into apparently had a *horrible* reputation. It was a group of old bats called the Ladies of the Forest who held conferences and talked about how men were slaves, so you could use them however you wanted. And they really did act as if their men were slaves, treating them even more horribly than their demi-human servants. They enjoyed seeing how much they could use a man until they broke him completely.
Scumbags.
On top of that, they only gathered noblemen of high status and sent the ones they couldn't use to die in battle, or so the rumors went. However, some people wondered if the women weren't killing the men themselves and playing it off like they died in the line of duty.
And what made this all worse? Zola was involved with them. She wasn't technically a part of their group, but she profited from selling off third and fourth sons that were *just taking up space at home*. A sane individual would never associate with that sort of thing. Most women—*good* women—would be disgusted.
Zola hadn't offered the same proposal to Nicks because a second son would draw too much attention. The Ladies of the Forest enjoyed gathering up young boys like me who didn't know any better. Furthermore, as long as we

weren’t students of the academy, it was easy to lie to us about the terms of engagement. Zola had tried to force the engagement before I went off to school and got wise to her game.
“Why do perverts like that have to come mess with a simple background character like me?!” I exclaimed. “A calm, peaceful life with no ups or downs would be so much better!”
“Honey…” My mom seemed troubled “…I have no idea what Leon is saying.”
“Yeah, me neither. Say, Leon… What are you planning on doing with all these weapons, anyway?” he asked, concerned. “Don’t tell me you plan to storm the capital? You better put that thought right out of your head.”
Oh man, I would love to march in there and wipe them all off the face of the planet, I thought as I cleaned the weapons, but there’s no way I can do that with my current abilities.
There were armed knights in the royal capital. If I really did charge in there, they would either arrest me, or the buffed-up demi-human servants all the noble ladies kept would beat me to a pulp before I could get close.
“If I’m gonna get rich quick, the best way to do that is to become an adventurer,” I said instead.
My parents exchanged looks.
“Adventurer” was actually among the acceptable occupations in this world. Or rather, an occupation that society had no choice but to recognize. After all, the nobles of this kingdom were descendants of the adventurers who had discovered this new land, accumulated its wealth, and made the region their home. And of course, adventure led to wealth. This was why, even at the academy, nobles became adventurers.
Or at least, that was the game’s rationale. Really, it was an excuse to have the love interests fawn over the female protagonist when they went into dungeons, where she would farm affection points with them. Nonetheless, it was now an angle I could use to save my own skin.
Dad shook his head. “You should give up on that. Dungeons aren’t the sort of challenge you can face by yourself. Plus, it will take some time before you’re skilled enough to earn money.”
Mom agreed. “He’s right, you know. And it’s incredibly difficult to find a new floating island these days. You won’t be able to make that much for the effort.”
The quickest way to make bank for adventuring was to claim an undiscovered island. Some were perfectly suited to human habitation and could be cultivated, and others were full of precious resources that could be harvested. If you found an island, the rights to it were automatically yours. You could even establish your own territory and become independent. Of course, all the islands near the continent had been claimed. There were none left…
Except for the one I knew of.
“Sorry,” I said. “I’ve made my decision, and I’m going.”

If I were the only one at risk, I could just run away and forget the whole mess, but my little brother, Colin, was only nine. I couldn't stand by and watch him be sold to that gaggle of perverts.
My dad seemed to sense my resolve. "Do you need anything?"
I didn't hesitate to rattle off a list of everything I wanted. I knew I was demanding the impossible, but this was a life-or-death mission. If doing nothing meant becoming a plaything for a bunch of handsy old murder-hags, then I'd rather take my chances adventuring, even if my chances of survival were low.
"I don't care if it's shaped like a rowboat, I need an airship," I told him. "I'd also like some bullets. The special-made ones."
Dad raised his eyebrows. "What in the world are you planning to do with all that? Are you really going to charge into a dungeon? You'd be better off taking the regular service airship."
"The regular service one won't take me where I want to go."
I held up the rifle in my hands. It was a bit odd for a weapon like this to exist in a fantasy world of magic and swords, but then again, the airships fired cannons at each other. It followed that guns for people existed, too. When I pulled the trigger, a metallic clank signaled the weapon's attempt to fire with no ammo.
There were some things even a background character couldn't concede on. I didn't want to live the rest of my life as someone's toy. I was going to fight back. I'd show them how stubborn a mob could be.
"All right." Dad gave in. "I'll try to get something ready for you as quickly as I can. But you *have* to come back. If you don't promise me that…you get nothing."
It's not like I don't want to come back, but I know I'm putting my life on the line.
"I swear it. I'll come back," I lied. I wanted with all the hell in me to protect myself, save my brother, and outwit Zola. And I wanted my revenge on that witch for trying to sell me. I just couldn't guarantee I'd get it.
I resumed my preparations, letting my anger smolder inside of me.

***

"I can't believe I'm really going to have to do this…"
It wasn't like I'd never considered using my knowledge of the game to mow down enemies before. I was just usually too busy…living. Modest meals with my family, training with my dad, then farm work. Before I knew it, the sun would be setting and I'd have to get back home for my studies.
As a border barony, we were poor. At least, compared to those on the mainland or in the capital. In my estimation, we were further impoverished due to Zola. Without our rank, and without *her*, we would've had more.
If only, if only.

As I walked to the edge of Bartfort House's floating island, I ran into a creepy flying-fish creature. I raised my bolt-action rifle, pulling the trigger. These were the kinds of monsters in this game's frivolous story. They were pure, absolute evil, so I didn't hesitate to dispatch them. I didn't even need to feel remorse for ending a living creature's existence—the moment you beat them, their bodies just dissolved. And of course they were hostile and attacked people on sight, so it was better to finish them off.

Plus, defeating them meant you earned invisible experience points.

"Crap! I missed."

I loaded the next shot, readied my weapon, and aimed. My target was about one meter wide. And each bullet was expensive.

In the game, the best course of action was to draw the monster closer before shooting. Unfortunately, if you got locked in close combat, the worst-case scenario was death, which was one thing with a virtual body and another thing entirely with a real one.

The monster pressed close, cracking its jaws open to take a chunk out of me. I could see lines of sharp, jagged teeth inside, and a ripple of fear ran through me.

But if I ran away from this, my life was basically forfeit.

Up until this point, I'd told myself I would *eventually* go out and farm experience points. I would *eventually* become an adventurer, search for an island, go exploring… I would *eventually* earn money. Yeah, *eventually*. The idle thoughts of an idle kid.

Now, I didn't have any more time to procrastinate.

I pulled the trigger, and the bullet ripped through the monster's mouth, blasting out through the back of its skull. The beast lost momentum just short of where I stood and collapsed.

I watched its body fall over the edge of the island then disappear in a puff of black smoke before it hit the ocean's surface.

"That should have given me experience, right?" I glanced at my left hand, but I didn't feel like anything had changed. Maybe reality wasn't the same as the game. Still, that didn't mean I could quit. For now, I needed to improve my marksmanship.

Besides working with my rifle, I also had to learn how to maneuver the airship I was going to travel in. I wouldn't be able to reach my destination otherwise.

My plan was to retrieve what was, in game terms, a cheat item. It would be nice if the in-game items I'd paid real money for were there as well, but regardless, I would be locating the stockpile of treasures intended for the protagonist's use. I felt bad depriving the main character like this, but my life was on the line. She was going to have to share.

I shifted my rifle in both hands. "It'll work out. According to my calculations, she and I will be in the same year at the academy. I'll find some way to pay her back, and then we'll be even."

I still felt guilty, but my desire to be free was stronger than my guilt. My chastity was in danger here.
“Is this how young girls who get married off to perverted old dudes feel? Damn! This world is insane.” I scowled, surveying the area for monsters. I had a very limited time frame to work with. “I should have put in some effort sooner.”

***

One month later, I was off.
Though tiny, the ship was surprisingly solid. A propeller engine was attached to it, which made it easy to steer. I stood on the deck, the sun’s rays so strong I pulled the hood of my robe over my head.
“Dad really pushed himself getting all of this together.”
It wasn’t just the ship—he found me a rifle, sword, and other miscellaneous things as well. I had water, food, and weapons, enough to last a single person a while. No amount of gratitude would repay what my parents had done for me; they had really pushed themselves financially. The ship we already owned, but Dad added the propeller engine—a substantial expense for an impoverished noble house like ours.
The ship also had electricity and gas, which made me wonder again what the hell kind of fantasy world this was.
I sat with my rifle drawn up against me and took in my surroundings through binoculars. I set them down, took my map in hand, and fished out my compass. “Now *this* is fantasy.”
Two hands split the compass’s face, one for my current direction and another set to a specific destination. It was rather convenient, a compass equipped with a dial you could set to point wherever you wanted to go.
My knowledge of the game had faded over the last ten years, but fortunately, right after I regained the memories of my past life, I recorded the coordinates for the treasure hoard on a piece of paper. Past me really was looking out for present me! And/or past me had fantasies about using cheat items to wreak havoc and got too distracted by his rigorous country lifestyle to pursue any of them, tomato, to-mah-to.
“I really should have put more effort into finding these things sooner.”
It was human nature to recognize what you should be doing and still not do it. You could call me a perfect example of that. I’d mumbled the same refrain numerous times and lamented endlessly, but still never taken any action. I’d just dragged myself through each day until this crisis finally lit a fire under my butt.
But I could justify my inaction with the fact that my life in this world was far harsher than it had been in Japan. Work on the farm was really rough, and I’d spent all my extra hours studying for the academy. I spent every day exhausted. I didn’t even have the extra strength to train on my own, nor did I possess any unique intelligence or skills. Where were my special

reincarnation perks, huh? What about super smarts I could use to cheat and manipulate domestic affairs? Nope, nada, and often as not I found world knowledge from my previous life just didn't apply in the game world.
I watched boulders float in the sky around me as I sailed on.
"The sky is blue, the ocean is blue… Everything is the same boring color. Except the occasional cloud."
I wondered how close I was to losing my mind. I could just use my gun to end it all here. Maybe a better life waited for me after this one—my previous one hadn't been nearly this bad.
I entertained that thought for a moment but shook my head vigorously. I had to endure.
"My death isn't going to solve anything. Those hags will just take Colin as their victim instead."
I talked to myself a lot more in this life, that was for sure.
I lifted my head. The sun was blindingly bright.
I miss Japan.
I'd thought numerous times about abandoning everything and running away, but this world was more dangerous than my old home. There were monsters and pirates. The risk of death was everywhere. Even if I did escape, how would I find work in the kingdom? "This world is tough for background characters."
If I ran into an air pirate now, it would be all over. I surveyed my surroundings warily.
Suddenly, the wind picked up, and my map flapped about wildly. I set my compass on it to keep it from flying away, which was when I noticed the needle—the one that was supposed to be pointing to my destination—spinning uncontrollably.
"What's going on?"
I stood, and the gusts grew stronger. I had to brace myself to keep from falling. I gripped the railing and looked overboard, but the ocean was completely calm. The clouds were floating at their usual languid pace. It didn't look like a storm was picking up.
A shadow began to block the sun.
"So it's above me?"
When I glanced up, all I saw was a white cloud. A *large* cloud. My left hand, which shielded my face, curled into a fist.
Below, then?
When I looked down at the ocean again, part of it was glowing green. I slumped over, pressing my forehead to the railing, and stifled the laughter bubbling up from my throat.
"So that's it. Of all things I could get, I'm getting *this*! Is it because I paid real money in my past life? Or did it exist in this world to begin with? Well, not that it matters either way. This is the jackpot. The ultimate jackpot!" I howled, looking up at the sky and throwing my arms open wide.

I had hoped it would be here, but I hadn't been able to invest too much faith in the idea for fear of disappointment. I just came out this way to check—and sure enough, bingo!
"Hold on, I haven't gotten my hands on it yet," I cautioned myself.
I regained my composure and moved the ship closer to the water, heading straight for the glowing marker. Tremors ran through the vessel, creaking under the strain.
"Come on, don't fail me now."
I got the ship over the marker, and then I was no longer steering it—that was all the marker. The ship jolted upward, the momentum so fierce I couldn't even stay on my feet. All I could do was sink to my knees and grit my teeth. My boat hurtled through the air, up into the clouds, until everything around me was a stark white. My body was cold, and my clothes were damp.
I wrapped my robe around my rifle to safeguard it, then tried to navigate my boat through the dense cloud. A stiff breeze tried to deter me from pressing farther, so I steered myself into the headwind. As I plunged higher, still completely blind, violent gusts buffeted my ship.
I pushed the electricity in the engine until it was at capacity, emitting gruesome sounds. Even that was drowned out by the roar of the wind, so loud I couldn't hear the engine despite standing right beside it.
The compass was completely useless. Both needles spun frantically. I had no idea where I was. All I could do was continue into the headwind. Freezing, my clothes growing heavier as more water seeped in, I fought hopelessly against the headwind, alone.
"Please, I've only got this one chance!"
I wasn't sure if minutes or hours had passed when the abused engine suddenly erupted in flames.
"No! Hold on! Just hold on for me!"
In the next moment, the engine exploded. Flames danced around the edges of the propeller as it spun several more times, then flew off into the clouds. Naturally, the fire began to spread along the wooden ship. Violent tremors shook my vessel as it hurled itself out of the cloud—and toward a floating island, enveloped in misty white.
I stared wide-eyed at the sight hurtling toward me. I'd seen this place numerous times in the game, but it looked enormous in person. The island was covered with giant trees, their roots jutting up from the ground. Plant life draped from its edges.
"Amazing…"
Then, realizing my grave danger, I panicked and moved to the propeller to steer—but it had been blown off during the explosion, and there was nothing I could do.
"You gotta be kidding me!"
The ground getting closer with every second, I scrambled for my baggage and tried to calculate the best timing—then jumped overboard. I dropped

everything in my hands and tumbled to the ground, slamming to a stop when my back hit one of the giant tree roots. My ship rammed into the ground some ways from me, shattering into pieces upon impact and sending the remaining supplies on board scattering.

I forced myself up, aching everywhere, and wiped the sweat of sheer panic from my brow. “Crap, that was close. Guess it was dangerous to head here on a boat after all.”

The trip would have been easier on a larger airship, but that would have required money. And my parents didn’t exactly have the means.

“Ah well, still managed to get here.”

Black spots yet haunted my vision. I put a hand on my aching head and quickly moved to retrieve my most important supplies. Some had caught fire and were a lost cause, but I could make do with what was left. I gathered all of my things in one area, including some charred wood scraps from my boat.

I’d managed to make it to my destination, but I’d lost my ship in the process. Now there really was no escape. As long as I collected the *thing* sleeping here on the island, I would be fine. If it wasn’t here, then, well, I would never be able to escape this place.

When I finally plopped myself down to rest, quite a bit of time had passed. It was starting to get dark.

Rummaging through my supplies, I selected some food and water. The only rations I could find were dried bread, which I washed down quickly with the water. The bread was made more with sustenance in mind than flavor.

Tomorrow’s gonna be a busy day.

“If I came all this way and there’s nothing here, I’m going to feel like an idiot.” I used the shattered pieces of my boat to start a campfire and warm my chilled body. After that, I checked my rifle and the other supplies for damage.

“Looks like everything is in working order. I’m just glad this was okay.”

In the light of the campfire, I started counting out my ammo and filling the magazine of my rifle. These were some of the special bullets I’d had my dad prepare, each one etched with a small lightning bolt.

It had cost about three to five thousand in-game currency per bullet for the game’s standard ammo. These, on the other hand, were magic bullets, standard stuff you’d see in a fantasy game; a direct hit could light things on fire or freeze them. Subsequently, they easily ran over ten thousand for a single bullet. I felt nothing but gratitude toward my parents, since they’d acquired so many for me.

“If I make it back alive, I’m really going to have to be a more dutiful son. Huh… Come to think of it, I was never very dutiful in my previous life.” Especially considering I died before my parents. That was about the most unfilial act imaginable.

“Wonder what happened to my little sister? Wish I could have smacked her once.”

I still remembered the day when I woke up in this world—or rather, the day I recalled my previous life. The memory of how my sister made me play her otome game was faint, almost bittersweet now.

It's thanks to her I have any knowledge of the game to take advantage of. Maybe I should be grateful, I thought. Then again, if she never forced that game on me in the first place, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have died and ended up here.

Or maybe I would have?

After I finished checking the bullets, I set the rifle aside. Then I leaned my back against the tree root, giving my weary body some rest. It felt like forever since I last walked on solid ground. It was calming to lie down.

"Ugh, why did I reincarnate into an otome game…? I wish I could have reincarnated into a *normal* fantasy world." I paused. "Well, no, my original world would have been ideal. Yeah, Japan would have been the best, if I had my choice."

No monsters, no air pirates… Japan seemed like paradise.

I closed my eyes. "Tomorrow…I'm gonna have to…work hard…"

My life was riding on this gamble—and the results were in sight, waiting for me.

Chapter 2:
Lost Item

THE WORLDBUILDING of this otome game was decidedly unbalanced. The developers apparently wanted an excuse to build powerful items, so *Lost Items* were scattered throughout the game. These were artifacts from ages long past that couldn't be duplicated by modern technology, and most sold for an exorbitantly high price.

Among these Lost Items was some equipment that only the protagonist could use, to make her special in the game world. One such item was hidden on this very island.

I continued through the unmaintained paths of the forest, wiping the sweat from my brow as I went. I used the sword from the sheath on my back to hack away at the overgrowth. It was difficult to move through this place; the ground itself was sludgy mud that nearly stole my footing numerous times.

"This would've been better with a hatchet."

I had actually brought a hatchet with me, but the wooden handle had splintered during the crash. It was useless now.

"I've never used a sword outside of training," I grunted.

I was technically a noble, after all. After waking up before the crack of dawn, I practiced the sword with my dad. Richer nobles had retainers who were masters in the martial arts to teach their children, but poor families like ours had no such resources.

I headed toward the center of the island, but unlike in the video game, it took me hours to get there. Unsurprisingly, reality differed greatly from the virtual world. Beyond the unkempt paths, the mosquitoes and other insects around the ponds were nothing to scoff at either. However, the most dangerous thing was actually…

"Here it comes again," I grumbled under my breath, and I fell to my hands and knees.

This enemy wasn't a monster, but rather a spherical armored robot. It had no legs and seemed to drift about, floating through the air. Two long arms hung at its sides, and a pointed, hat-like helmet sat on its head. It was one of the robots that patrolled this island—or base, rather. They periodically made their rounds through the forest.

I held my breath and remained completely still, praying it wouldn't find me. Once it was gone, I lifted myself up and moved away at speed.

"Good thing it was broken."

The robots were, by and large, rust-eaten and on the verge of falling apart, but they continued to operate as they had for centuries, defending this place. I suspected the only reason they hadn't found me yet was because they were in such poor condition. It was a bit depressing that the robots

continued to protect the base in spite of there being no humans left on the island, but they were a pain to deal with if they caught you.
“I need to hurry and reach that base.”
Within the base on this island lay the Lost Item the robots were protecting. In the game, this was the pickup location for anything bought from the game’s shop. The protagonist had a few opportunities to leave the school, and during those times she could make her way here to retrieve her loot.
I remained vigilant as I continued through the forest, walking several more kilometers before I discovered a building on the verge of collapse. Ivy encased its outer shell and trees grew inside, jutting out of the broken ceiling; it had obviously been abandoned for a long time. It was even more vivid in person than it was in the game.
“Well, now at least I have proof that I really did reincarnate.”
I had doubted myself numerous times: Maybe those weren’t memories I’d regained. Maybe they were delusions. Perhaps I’d led myself to think I was living another life. Maybe I was desperately hoping my reality was nothing more than a fantasy.
I felt more at ease now that I knew I wasn’t losing my mind, and I took a moment to observe the surrounding area before slipping inside. Electric control panels were embedded into the concrete walls, but none of the base’s defenses worked. All in all, the futuristic vibe was oddly nostalgic. Everything had long since been swallowed up in tree roots and vines.
Similar structures were located on other floating islands, and adventurers scoured them for treasures with which they could build their fortunes. If other nobles found an undiscovered island like this, they treated the ruins as a dungeon to conquer, earning all kinds of praise for carrying out the legacy of their ancestors.
“Though you could also say they’re just pillaging archaeological sites.”
After all, adventurers showed no care for the integrity of the local architecture if it got in the way of plundering. From a less self-aggrandizing perspective, they were scavengers, looters, and destroyers.
“Well, I *am* doing the same thing, so it’s not like I have room to judge.”
I continued down a corridor and discovered an open door. Inside the room, a patrol robot drifted through the air, advancing in my direction. It trembled and juddered, miraculously still moving despite being on the verge of breaking down, just like every other robot I’d seen. Really, their dedication to guarding a ruin no one would ever come back to made me feel an entire three feelings.
I steadied my rifle. “Sorry about this,” I apologized, then pulled the trigger. Electricity discharged as the bullet hit its mark dead center. A short pulse of light, and the machine crashed to the ground. The light in its eyes flickered a couple of times before extinguishing.
I waited with my rifle trained on the robot, but it showed no more signs of movement, nor did I detect any others approaching.

“Just like in the game. Glad I remembered their weakness. Now, I think it was this way…”
So these magical, electric bullets were indeed effective against the robots. Thank god. Considering these were supposed to be security units, it would have made sense for whoever built them to equip them with some resistance to electricity attacks. Alas, this was a fantasy otome game. If you started fussing about every plot hole, you’d be whining all day.
I relied on my memory to guide me through the building, and once again, I found a half-open door. Overgrowth had wrapped around it, forcing it ajar. Inside, a skeleton was slumped over to one side. I pressed my hands together to say a short prayer, then combed through their decomposed clothing. I pulled the initial key card from one pocket. It must have been an ID, because there was a faded picture with someone’s name written beneath it, though the ink was so faint with time that I couldn’t properly read it.
“This is the roman alphabet, right? That’s kinda…odd.” I never dreamed I’d be seeing those letters in this other world.
I pocketed the card and resumed my search, heading deeper into the building. I’d been here numerous times to retrieve various things to help me clear the game. Still, it *had* been ten years since I’d regained my memories. Some things I was a bit less confident about, so I needed to be careful. I was still beyond grateful for what little I remembered. Never again did I want to experience the anxiety and fear that came with drifting through the sky all alone.
I searched for a door I could access using my new key card. When I found one that seemed likely, I pressed the key to an electric monitor and watched it open.
The room inside resembled a rest area, complete with two derelict vending machines. One had fallen over, its contents spilling out. When I tried to pick up one of the cans, it crumbled like dust in my palm. Two skeletons were seated on a nearby sofa.
“I didn’t care when it was just a video game,” I muttered, “but now I have to wonder what the hell happened here.”
This base was a decaying ruin, but part of it still functioned. Why had a civilization with this much technical ingenuity perished? It worried me a bit.
“Never mind. My first priority is taking whatever I can from this place.”
One of these two skeletons had a second item I needed to proceed further into the building. I put my hands together in prayer again before I dug out the necessary key. Then I headed down a different corridor, until my way was blocked by another security robot. Although, this one was different than the others I’d encountered so far.
“Oh yeah.” I grimaced. “I forgot about these.”
This robot originally had quite a number of legs, but it had lost a few and didn’t seem capable of moving anymore. It was still blocking my way and equipped with weapons to prevent potential intruders.

I kept hidden behind the corner of a wall, then stuck my rifle out just enough to shoot it. When the bullet struck, light flashed through the room, but that wasn't enough to take the thing out. It had a Gatling gun in either hand and began firing in my direction. Only one of the guns was functional, though that was more than enough to make it a threat.

"That was close!"

My one saving grace was that the machine couldn't aim properly anymore. I pulled back behind the corner for safety and loaded another bullet before launching the next attack. This time, I used a mirror to help me aim instead of peeking out from behind the safety of the wall. This might have been cheating a little, but if I stuck my head out like an idiot I'd have more holes in me than a block of Swiss cheese.

If this robot had been properly maintained, I would *already* be Swiss cheese.

"Dammit! This thing is too tough. Not to mention my aim is—shit! I missed again!"

I calculated how many bullets this endeavor had consumed already; the money lost was insane. My stance was completely wrong, which was why my shots weren't landing, and even when they did land, the robot kept firing anyway.

I buried almost thirty bullets in the robot before it finally stopped. Game-wise, I should have been able to take it down within ten shots.

"Guess real life is totally different."

I pulled myself together and kept a lookout as I dispatched the other security guards on the way to the center of the base. When I finally reached my destination at the end of a dimly lit corridor, I was down to only a handful of bullets. I used the second key card to open the door and descended a set of stairs into the basement.

It was so dark I couldn't see anything, so I pulled a lantern out from my kit and lit it.

"They've got electricity. I wish they had flashlights," I grumbled as I started along the lower level. Light bulbs, yes, flashlights, no, whatever—at least I had the lantern.

The occasional skeleton lay toppled over here and there, ratcheting up the fear that coursed through me. I had no idea what had happened here, but I wanted to get what I came for and go home.

As I followed the path from my memories, I came to a large room blanketed in yet more roots and vines. This spacious area was an airship dock, and here, my purchased items were supposed to be held.

I held my rifle in both hands and shuffled forward with caution. Most of the dock was swallowed up by overgrowth, with tree roots breaking through the ceiling and dangling overhead. What airships remained rotted under moss and ivy and were clearly inoperable.

In the midst of all this sat one conspicuously large spaceship. This was my objective. Even at a glance, it dwarfed the others.

“No doubt about it. This is it.”
This ship was the only one that hadn’t fallen into disrepair, even though it, too, was tangled in vines and branches. The moss seemed to give its surface an emerald sheen, though part of its gray armor peeked through. A bona fide battleship.
A tremor ran through me. “It’s really here. This is really it!”
I gingerly edged up the ship’s gangway, making sure it wasn’t broken. Its hatch was knotted in such a thick layer of vines it looked impossible to open. I pulled out my sword and hacked away, then I used my second key card to open the door and enter the battleship.
The interior was much different from the exterior. No vegetation to speak of; it was entirely pristine, its design highly futuristic. Admittedly, the aesthetic ran a bit strange for the world it was in, but then again, all the ruins were futuristic, too.
“The interior was never shown in the game. Huh. So this is what it looks like inside.”
It was ridiculously huge, about seven hundred meters in size. I was almost skeptical that a behemoth like this could actually fly, but this world had floating islands and continents. Some small islands were refashioned into airships themselves, and some of those were easily over a thousand meters and moved around like floating fortresses, or so I’d heard. I’d never seen one myself, so I couldn’t draw much of a comparison. But knowing that, it wasn’t far-fetched to think this thing could fly, too. So to others, it might look sizeable, but not especially weird.
The ship’s two boxy engines were astern, while the bow was more aerodynamic, with a neck tapering into a sharp point. In the game, it had looked more like an isosceles triangle with two boxes fastened on either side at the wide end. The shape itself was rather simple, without any propeller or sails.
The airships in this world came in all shapes and sizes, but the most common looked like seaworthy ships and rugby balls. These were simplest to make, and the physics of this world made them easy to get into the air—fulfilling the game’s purpose of getting players to go out adventuring.
As I made my way through the interior of the aircraft, lights flickered on automatically, so I stowed my lantern. Only one hurdle remained.
I made my way to the center of the ship, the only sound the echo of my own footsteps. I stopped in front of a door at the end of a long corridor to wipe away my sweat. Nervous, I checked my rifle; there were bullets ready in the magazine. I steadied my breath. “Time to go in.”
I pushed the door open and stepped inside.
This was the central facility of the spaceship. A pilot controlled everything from its spacious core. In the very center, growing right out of the floor, was a robot with a humanoid shape, about six meters tall. Its torso was enormous, its head a simple helmet with red camera lenses glaring out from behind its visor. The sound of it powering up echoed through the room.

I steadied my rifle.
“Intruder located,” said a robotic voice. “Exterminate… Exterminate…”
The robot moved slowly, its enormous hands reaching for me. I fired, but the only result was a flash of purple lightning that rippled over its armor. My shots were useless against it.
“Guess you’ve got some tough defenses.” I loaded my next shot, letting the empty shells drop to the floor with a metallic clink that reverberated through the control room. “Don’t suppose you’d forgive my intrusion if I showed you my key card, huh?”
It was a feeble hope, but—
Its tone was synthetic, electric…and, somehow, ice-cold. “The key card in your possession belongs to a base employee. Your physical features are not a match to the employee in question, nor any other employee here. Furthermore, the likelihood of their survival is astronomically low. Therefore, you are an intruder. I will eliminate you.”
“Thanks for the thesis?!” On one hand, I’d never dreamed this thing would engage in a serious conversation, but on the other hand, now was *not* the time.
My next shot was another bullseye, but I wasn’t doing any damage. I had to run when a long arm came sweeping toward me.
I pulled a grenade from my belt, yanked out the clip, and chucked it. The robot knocked the weapon away with one hand—or at least, it tried to. The moment the arm connected, the bomb exploded. A torrential current of electricity rolled across its armor, and for a moment, the robot froze. Smoke billowed out of its joints.
“I did it!”
But as I rejoiced over my small victory, light flashed inside the robot’s visor.
“Magical attack detected. Threat level increased. Activating magic barrier.”
Light emitted from the robot, enveloping it protectively. I shot another bullet, but its new barrier repelled the attack like it was nothing. The electricity in the bullet didn’t even activate, and it clattered to the floor, inert.
“Oh come on, that’s cheating!” I snarled.
“Thank you.”
“*Excuse* me? You broken piece of crap.” I switched out the magazine before taking aim once again.
The robot’s movements seemed to slow after my next few rounds hit their mark.
“Being called a cheater in battle is a compliment,” the robot informed me. “I have learned this. Is this not correct?”
“Of course that’s not correct!” I barked. “More importantly, why the hell can you defend against magical attacks?!”
No enemies in the game had ever used a magical barrier like this against me.

“A simple answer for a simple question,” the robot explained. “We cannot claim to fully understand magic, but we did analyze it; we prepared countermeasures. This is natural.”
“You’re pretty intelligent! And chatty, too!” I dodged around the room, firing blast after blast. I searched for a weak point to exploit, but I was coming up short.
Wonder if it’d be so kind as to enlighten me if I asked?
“It has been a long time since I conversed like this,” the robot went on. “I may be elated.”
I had no idea what this blasted thing was talking about, but it—and the cheat-tier space battleship we were in—was a Lost Item. This robot was ancient technology, an item I’d purchased in the online cash shop for a thousand real-life yen. Actually, it sounded kinda cheap when I put it that way, but there was no doubt this was an incredible weapon.
The fact that it possessed artificial intelligence wasn’t entirely surprising, but I never thought it would be capable of conversation. That part hadn’t been in the game.
I reached for the other grenade dangling from my belt.
“A hand grenade imbued with offensive magic? It will be ineffective against me in my current state,” the robot said.
I flung it at him. “Idiot!” I ran for cover.
My opponent didn’t even try to defend itself. The grenade hit, and an enormous blast sent me sprawling, but I leaped quickly to my feet. Black smoke billowed from where the robot stood, making it difficult to see the aftermath.
“Even a normal explosion has some power to it, doesn’t it? Hope I didn’t damage the ship.” That was why I’d been hesitant to use it at first. After all, this battleship would soon be mine. I wanted to leave as few scratches as possible.
Smoke hung thick in the air. I lowered my rifle. I was certain victory was mine. “Phew. That was my only one of those, but even in the game, it was kind of overpowered—”
An enormous hand shot out of the black cloud and seized me. In shock, I dropped my rifle. I did manage to whip out my sword and thrust it into the robot’s fingers. Sadly, my attack only damaged my blade; not even a dent for Robo-Kong.
My enemy strengthened its crushing grip.
“Let me go!” I demanded.
“I was surprised,” the robot said calmly. “That was simply a powerful grenade, wasn’t it? Your kind seems so obsessed with magic. I never thought you would carry a weapon like that in your arsenal. Your strategy intrigues.”
Part of its armor had peeled away after the blast, revealing the infrastructure inside—motors and wires and gears.

It kept me in its grip as it leaned forward, peering into my face. “Your kind’s martial strategy has changed. A rifle certainly is an unusual choice, and I’m fascinated by those bullets you were using, too. Imbuing them with magic is a novel idea.”
The lenses inside its visor zeroed in on me, then zoomed back out again several times, as if studying me intently.
I had nowhere to run, and its grip was growing tighter and tighter. I flailed to escape, but then it suddenly asked, “I have a question. What year is it in the new calendar?”
“Ugh! New calendar? How the hell would I know? If you mean Holfort Kingdom’s calendar, then—gaaaah!”
A jolt of electricity shot from the robot’s hand and into my body. I screamed, and my body convulsed; I thrashed, numb and terrified, but I couldn’t wriggle free.
“That answer was sufficient. I’ve asked this same question numerous times, but it seems our kind has lost.”
My body slumped as the current receded, and the robot ceased to move. My jaw trembled, and I couldn’t close my mouth, so I used my sword hand to wipe away the spittle dribbling down my chin. “L-Lost? ‘Your kind’? What are you talking about…?”
What kind of opponent could possibly defeat a cheat-tier battleship like this?
“We lost to the new humans. Our ancient civilization was annihilated by the overwhelming power of the magic that they possess,” the robot explained.
New humans? I didn’t remember that from the game’s lore. Well, this was balls. I’d been hoping for an easy victory here. The last thing I needed was some new story twist.
Whatever. All I needed to do was find some way to escape.
“And you are a descendant of the new humans,” the robot went on in a low voice. “That makes you my enemy.” Its intentions were clear.
“Y-you sure sound emotional about all of that. Okay, for now, let’s calm down and talk this—hey, w-wait! Aaauuugh!”
Its enormous hand squeezed around me; I could hear my bones creaking.
“Enemies must be exterminated…” the robot chanted. “Exterminated…”
Peace talks are over, got it. The damage I had inflicted hadn’t been enough to destroy the robot, but it had weakened it so it couldn’t crush me instantly. Unfortunately, that meant it would drag out my pain instead.
Was I the luckiest man in the world, or fate’s punching bag? The next few moments would tell.
“Y-you bastard…still clinging to a war that happened who knows how long ago…”
“Our mission is not yet a failure,” the robot insisted. “We must exterminate the new humans. We were ordered to stand by in this base, but now that your key card has reactivated us, we can at least send off this one ship and obliterate what is left of you. Many of your ilk have made their way to this

base before. From the state of you, it's clear the new humans have weakened considerably. Once I finish with you, I will take this ship and cleanse the world of their descendants."
So other adventurers had come to this island before?
More importantly, this bastard was about to go berserk on the outside world—and possibly massacre my family in the process! I didn't care if he killed Zola, but my parents, Nicks, and Colin were a different matter.
I lifted the pommel of my sword to my lips and ripped the pin on the end out with my teeth. I turned the sword toward the robot. "Choke on this, you pile of scrap!"
The blade flew from the hilt and pierced the visor, sending purple lightning rippling across the robot's frame. It penetrated deep.
A small explosion forced the robot's head back with a jerk. The visor shattered, and one of the shards grazed my cheek, leaving a trail of blood in its wake.
The robot's grip loosened, and I slipped through its fingers to the floor. The landing shot pain through my knees, but at least now I could breathe. I choked on relief as I crawled over to my rifle.
The robot was going haywire, its movements choppy and unpredictable. I hauled myself to my feet and managed to clamber back up its frame, finding purchase where I could, the rifle hooked under my arm. At last, I jammed the barrel of my weapon into the broken visor. "Not gonna say I don't get where you and yours are coming from, but I got my own agenda here. So you're gonna shut up and do what I tell you to do."
I pulled the trigger. Then I loaded another round and pulled it again. Each time I did this, the robot tried to reach up to peel me off, but to no avail.
"It's over."
A few more shots and I was out of bullets, but thankfully, the robot had stopped moving. Parts of it hummed with electrical discharge. It was quite clearly damaged beyond repair. Black smoke poured out of the gaps in its outer plating.
And yet I could still hear its electronic, inhuman voice speaking to me. "You are trying to use me, aren't you? It's futile."
The robot wasn't moving anymore, so I climbed off its carcass and booted up the control panel in the middle of the room. In the game, this allowed you to register yourself as master of the ship.
"Put a cork in it," I told the robot. "I'm here to collect an item *I* paid for. Stop complaining and obey me."
Well, I wasn't sure my old-world payment necessarily conferred ownership, but I needed it regardless or I'd have no future in this world.
"I would rather self-destruct than allow one of the new humans to commandeer me," the robot said defiantly.
"You'd be better off serving me than self-destructing. Blowing us both up would be a pain in the ass. I don't want to die."

Just then, I realized the control screen allowed me to change from the roman alphabet to Japanese. *“Suspiciously convenient,”* I said, switching to Japanese—my good old mother tongue, *“but you won’t hear any complaints from me! Much easier this way.”*
The screen lit up, indicating I should place my hand on it to be scanned. Mastery of the ship was almost mine. I was on a high from the adrenaline.
“Japanese?” the robot queried. “You can read it? Your kind shouldn’t be able to use Japanese at all.”
But wait. That voice was coming from the control room’s speakers. It wasn’t the robot at all.
Apparently the ship’s AI had taken an interest in me.
I set my hand on the control panel and jokingly replied, *“Well, my soul is pure Japanese. Rice and miso soup every morning—two staples of a good Japanese breakfast. Haven’t eaten them in a while, though.”* I paused and switched back to the common tongue. “Not that you’d understand any of what I’m saying anyway.”
Would the robot get it if I told it I’d been reincarnated? If I told anyone else, they’d smile awkwardly and flee.
“Your soul? Are you referring to a cycle of death and rebirth?” the AI asked.
“Huh, so you do understand me? Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about. Probably.”
I didn’t know if it could speak the language too, but it had understood when I described the state of my soul. …And it had been a long time since I talked to someone in Japanese like this. It was nice.
The control panel finished analyzing my genes and began scanning my entire body, washing me in a beam of red light. As soon as that finished, the AI resumed its questions.
“Judging by your genetic information, you do indeed have traces of Japanese in you. However, you are still one of the new humans. You just happen to have some of the old humans’ genes. Curious. That shouldn’t be possible.”
“You don’t say. Anyway,” I said, again reverting to Common, “now this ship belongs to me, right?”
“Yes. As of today, you are the owner of this ship. Do you have a name for it?”
I stopped to think. The game didn’t allow you to name the ship. “I can’t think of anything good. In the game, the ship was just ‘Luxion.’”
“Very well, the name has been registered as ‘Luxion.’”
“So you’re not gonna blow yourself up, huh?” I asked. “Works for me.”
I was feeling pretty ragged at this point, so with the ship’s registry complete, I sank to the floor. Fumes still hung in the air from my battle with the humanoid robot. I examined my rifle; the wooden stock was cracked. I’d have to repair it before I could use it again.
“My parents’ present is looking a little worse for wear.” I breathed a sigh and looked up at the ceiling.
“If your soul is Japanese, then you have memories of the war, yes?”

“War? Nope. The period I lived in was peaceful, and I was merely a salaryman. I’ve never experienced any war before. Huh… Now that I think about it, I guess my previous life was pretty sweet.” I felt a sense of longing for my old world. If I had been able to go back right in that moment, I would have.
The control room gradually cleared of smoke. Some ventilation somewhere, I suppose.
“Did you know?” I babbled in Japanese. “This world is just a crazy, bizarre otome game world.” I wanted someone, anyone, to hear my story.
“What is an otome game?” the AI asked.
“A dating simulation-type game.” I told it everything—what era I was from in Japan, what led to my reincarnation. When I was finished, I asked, *“So, are you surprised?”*
“I admire the depth of your delusions. However, if they were mere delusions, you wouldn’t be able to speak Japanese as you do. Thus, I can only say this is…very intriguing.”
“Hey, I’m surprised, too. Plus, your very existence is proof. The fact that I knew about you and sought you out shows I’m telling the truth about this being a game world. Right?”
“It sounds as if you’ve lost your mind. Perhaps your brain merely wants to believe this all just a game?”
I waved my hand dismissively. “Eh, I don’t like bothering with complicated things. Besides, puzzling over it isn’t going to give us any answers. It’s a waste of time.”
I started coughing and covered my mouth with my gloved hand. It came away with a splatter of blood across my palm. “Was I wounded? Crap. I have to get back home…”
As my body slumped to the floor, I heard a voice call out, “Master Leon Fou Bartfort’s vital signs are weakening. Prepare for immediate transport to the medical bay.”

***

Three months had passed since Leon set off.
Zola was back at Bartfort House, berating Balcus in his workroom about the whole ordeal. She wasn’t the only one; that wretched Luce was there, too, blaming him for their son’s continued absence.
“I went to all that trouble to secure him that engagement,” Zola huffed, “and now it’s wasted. Honestly, what a foolish child, to go off on his own like that and get himself killed.”
Balcus’s hands closed into fists. His mood had been sour since morning, when Luce had flounced in to fret aloud that their son might be dead. Well, fine. All the more reason why he couldn’t defend himself against Zola now. He’d allowed this knowing the possible outcome.

“Now we’ll have to give her your other son,” Zola went on. “Even at his age, he can at least do some chores around the house.”
Balcus balked. “Colin? The boy’s not even ten years old. And Leon might still come back.”
Zola couldn’t hold back a snort of laughter. “Do you seriously believe that? It’s been three months since he left this island. Three. Months. It would be more than *odd* if he were still alive after this long. Ah, but I suppose it’s possible. Maybe he ran away to save himself. Honestly, this is precisely the problem with you rural nobles and your children. You don’t understand the chivalric code.”
According to Holfort’s Code of Chivalry, one swore fealty to their master. In the case of knights, that meant fealty to His Majesty. In turn, vassal knights swore their loyalty to regional lords. Also per the code, one lived a noble and righteous life; daily training and frugality were virtuous. Finally, it was a knight’s duty to put their life on the line for their liege. The truest honor came from fighting for Holfort Kingdom. The ideal knight was therefore compelled to act as sword and shield for the powerless.
More simply put, the code was a convenient moral structure for those in power to mold the behavior of their followers. In more recent years, the code had expanded to include protecting women and putting your life on the line for their sake. As it should.
Balcus strode across the room to put a hand on Luce’s shoulder while she sniffled. He almost looked like a loving husband beside her. That irked Zola.
What nonsense, she thought. I’m the one who was kind enough to marry a backwoods liege lord like you! How dare you rub your relationship in my face like this!
Luce was such an eyesore. It made the idea of selling off her sons and daughters to men and women in the capital that much sweeter.
And besides, this house already has an heir, Zola thought smugly. My son, Rutart. We don’t need any other children here.
At that moment, the young boy, Colin, flung open the workroom door with as much strength as he could muster. He was panting, gasping, trying to get words out.
“Colin, go back to your room,” Balcus ordered. “You know better than to enter without knocking—”
Colin thrust a finger at the window, still speechless.
As one, Zola, Balcus, and Luce hurried to peer outside. A shadow covered the fields, as if something was blocking the sun.
Balcus yanked the window open and leaned out. He gasped. “What in the world is that ship?”
Zola’s body seemed to shrivel in on itself. An enormous ship was hovering over their estate. “Wh-what?! A ship from where?!”
Was it air pirates? Or maybe another region had come to launch an attack? Possibly another country? She started panicking.

A smaller craft descended from the larger one, about twenty meters in length. Leon was riding inside of it.
Zola’s mouth gaped. The aircraft was loaded to the hilt with mountains of gold and silver treasure.
The ship landed, and Leon waved with both arms at all of them gaping in the window. “Dad! I came back just like I promised. Look at all this treasure!”
He was beaming, standing proudly in front of piles of wealth—not only precious metals, but heaps of jewels as well. It was impossible to guess how much it might all be worth, but if they were the real deal, they would net a ludicrous amount of money.

Luce sank to her knees with ugly sobs. “That boy… He didn’t contact us at all, and now he shows up out of nowhere… Thank goodness he’s okay.”
Zola couldn’t stand her happy smile.
Balcus scrambled out of his workroom and into the hall, clearly intending to run straight to Leon. Zola peeked back out the window and tried to get a better view of the treasure.
Leon spotted her and smirked triumphantly. *I win,* he mouthed*.*
Zola’s grip on the windowsill tightened, and she knew her expression was bitter. “That disgusting little runt.”
She watched Balcus fling himself at his son, wrapping Leon in his arms as he sobbed. “You damn moron!”
Zola slipped out of the room, annoyed. No matter. Every penny of the treasure he brought home is now mine. This works out in my favor. He’ll continue serving me, and I’ll reap the benefits. I’ll be the one with the last laugh.
Her elven slave was waiting for her in the hall. He followed behind her as she headed outside.

***

I wore a big grin as I took in Zola’s sour milk expression.
The first thing she did when she came outside was demand I hand over all of my treasure and my spaceship—or, airship, as she called it.
“The contract you made with my dad has nothing to do with me,” I said, the picture of reasonability. “At fifteen years old, I’m officially an adult. I’ve even registered as an adventurer. You know what that means, don’t you? Anything I found belongs to me, not my dad.”
This silenced her idiocy for a moment. My dad seemed to have something to say, but my mom stopped him from interfering.
Eventually, Zola responded petulantly, “You used your parents’ money to earn these treasures! And now you flaunt them before us and claim they’re *yours*?!”
I knew she would say that. But Holfort Kingdom had a strictly enforced rule that adventurers could claim any treasure they found. After all, this country had been founded on that basic principle.
“If my parents want to shame me, that’s one thing,” I said casually, “but you have no right to say anything to me. Hmm, why don’t you take this?”
I tossed her a leather bag full of gold bars. Honestly, those were insanely valuable on their own, but I was sure they wouldn’t please her, given the piles of treasure behind me. I offered her the gold precisely because I knew it would insult her.
Naturally, Zola refused to concede. “You can’t honestly think anyone’s going to accept your nonsense! Balcus will be the one in charge of managing your treasures, yes? I have every right to them!”

Before landing, I had consulted Luxion about this and knew exactly how to counter.
“That would only work if I left my fortune here. But I’ve struck out on my own, as an adult and an adventurer. I can handle my assets by myself.” I shrugged. “Though, I do still have to contribute to Bartfort House. So I’m thinking about investing in our territory. Our harbor could use some fixing up, don’t you think?”
Her brows furrowed, leaving deep wrinkles in her forehead as she glowered at me. It filled me with joy.
If I handed over any part of my fortune to Balcus, I was sure she’d immediately snatch it for herself. But she couldn’t swipe anything if I invested it directly in our land. She couldn’t pick up a road or cut off a chunk of the harbor and take it home with her.
Realizing she was at a disadvantage, Zola backed off. She marched back to her quarters in the manor, dragging her elf lover along with her.
I cackled as I watched her retreat.
My dad slapped me on the back. “Dummy, don’t egg her on. What good is pissing her off going to do?”
“That’s the woman who tried to sell me off to a perverted old lady,” I reminded him. “She owes me. Anyway, what do you think of my loot? Incredible, isn’t it?”
My parents gazed at the glimmering piles, genuinely surprised. “It really is,” Dad agreed. “Did you report it to the guild?”
The Adventurers’ Guild was an organization that took about twenty to thirty percent of an adventurer’s findings. Fortunately, the remaining amount belonged solely to me. The country called it a guild, even though it wasn’t privately owned and run like most guilds would be. This world’s arbitrary elements really did grate on my nerves.
I nodded. “Of course. And they took a huge chunk of my treasure. But the rest is all mine. And I want to replace the boat I destroyed. In fact…” I was feeling generous “…maybe I should just give you guys a real airship.”
My mom looked exasperated. “Don’t you think you should keep some of it for yourself? For the future? With this much, surely you could live on your own.”
I straightened my back. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you both about that.”

Chapter 3:
Enrollment

I HAD FOUND A FLOATING ISLAND. It was small, with no notable characteristics. Its mountains were middling, its forest nondescript, and its river meandered lazily across wide plains. But I could be independent there, so I made it my territory.

Plus, no matter how much I developed the land, its puny size ensured it would only ever be a baronetcy. Once I graduated from the academy, I could live out the rest of my days here. I would become a regional lord and hole up on the outskirts of civilization under the pretense of cultivating the land, a leisurely vassal to my parents' estate.

I hid the airship dock on the underside of the island and stored Luxion there. The AI was currently using pieces of his previous robot suit to make a brand-new, over-the-top airship. Helping Luxion in this endeavor were several worker robots. One of them, roughly the size of a metallic baseball with a single red eye, hovered beside me.

"Is making a fake like this really necessary?" I asked.

"It never hurts to be prepared," Luxion replied. "We can't dismiss the possibility that the human woman Zola might try to start something with us."

After discovering I could speak Japanese, Luxion had taken enough of an interest in me that he was obeying me—or at least no longer threatening to self-destruct. Evidently, he was easy to please.

"Well," I said, "what should we do about the rest of the island?"

"There are heated mineral aquifers in the interior. We could pump out the water and create a hot spring. It could be profitable as a tourist attraction."

"Hard no to tourists, but a hot spring sounds nice."

When I told my parents I was going to make this empty island my new home, they were less than enthused. Cultivating land might seem a simple task in theory, but it was arduous and painstaking in practice, they told me. Nevertheless, I insisted on my independence. Finally, my parents caved and told me to come to them if I needed help.

I would be fine. With Luxion overseeing everything, development would be no sweat. He had a versatile skill set. Due to the game's unrealistic worldbuilding, replenishing resources was completely unnecessary. Ergo, Luxion could create whatever I needed just about whenever I needed it. He couldn't pull stuff out from thin air, but he *could* transmute a random collection of rocks into gold.

I had no idea how his kind had managed to lose to the new humans when they possessed such cheat-tier abilities. Luxion said most of his base had already stopped functioning by the time his system booted up. Per prior orders, he'd remained on standby, and occasionally he would capture

descendants of the new humans from whom he would extract information. From them, he'd learned the common tongue.
Not that any of that mattered anymore.
Luxion was my ace in the hole, I was free from eternal servitude to a coven of perverted old ladies, and I was well on my way to my own damn life. Things were going great.
"Construction on the manor has commenced, and maintenance of the harbor is underway," Luxion informed me. "The land will look far more pleasant after a year."
Uncultivated land did look a mess. The ground was uneven and weeds grew all over. By no stretch could you call it "pleasant" *now*. Luxion was some kind of savant if he could make this place livable within a year. He was far more capable than you'd expect for a cash shop item that cost a thousand yen. Now I kind of regretted not spending more money on those items, but I couldn't say I was unsatisfied.
"See to it," I said. "I'm sick of adventuring. As a background character, it already took me several lifetimes' worth of effort just to retrieve you. I'd like to live the rest of my life as uneventfully as possible."
"So after obtaining my incredible, god-like power, you just want to use it to live the rest of your life as a shut-in. Impressive, I must say. Most egotistical. An unparalleled absence of ambition. Charmingly human."
I squinted at him. "Are you being passive-aggressive?"
"No. Sarcastic."
I flicked the little metal ball, sending Luxion's physical form spinning back through the air. Despite how solid the material of the outer shell appeared, it was wrapped in something soft, so it didn't hurt my fingers at all. Soon enough, he floated right back to his original position.
"More importantly," he said, "have you finished your preparations for enrollment in the academy?"
I shrugged. "Yeah, I'm finished. The merchants are putting together all kinds of stuff for my enrollment celebration, so there's not really anything for me to do. They're being way more amicable than usual; it's caught my dad off guard."
"No doubt due to the improvement in the local economy. Merchants are ever frank about their devotion to money. I suppose new humans are no exception."
Using the assets I'd procured during my three-month adventuring stint, I had restored my parents' harbor and poured funds into improving their island's infrastructure. I paid off their debts, then invested in a few stagnated areas of the region. The resulting economic boom lured in merchants, who were always bringing gifts to my parents' home. Their territory had actually been quite lively for the past few months.
"Anyway, what point is there in me attending the academy now?"
"Outwardly, the academy exists to educate the children of noble families and turn them into exemplary members of society," Luxion said. "There are

many other noble children just like you, holed up within their own territories, lacking basic knowledge about the world and high society as a whole. The academy aims to gather you all in one place to mold you. Additionally, it allows the kingdom to display the splendor of the capital to the uninitiated, thereby snuffing out any thoughts of rebellion. And of course, while they attend, the students become hostages that can be used against the regional lords.
“For the lords’ part,” Luxion went on, “it’s more about widening the breadth of their children’s knowledge—they get to see the capital, study hard, and make connections. There are pros and cons to both sides, but overall, the institution has a rather meaningful place in this society.”
“You sure do know a lot about this,” I mumbled.
“But the primary reason for the academy’s existence is to instill in students the idea that they’re all part of the same country,” Luxion explained. “If the worst comes to pass, the country is strongest when its people unite. According to what you’ve told me, Master, there are other nations in this world as well.”
So there were legitimate reasons for the academy’s existence? I was pretty sure it only existed because schools were an essential element in otome games, so the developers had to throw it in. But maybe there was a more profound meaning.
“I hear your people search for marriage partners at this academy as well,” Luxion continued. “For young noble children, this place is its own social sphere. Do be careful, Master. If you slip up, you may embarrass yourself.” What kind of uncultured swine did he think I was?
“I’m a background character,” I assured him. “I’m not going to stand out. They’ll treat me like a prop. My life over there won’t be better or worse than what I have now.”
“A ‘background character’? I understand your implication, however, I believe your judgment—”
“Ah well, I’ll secure a partner, no problem,” I interrupted. “No stunning, high-class flower from a noble family, just a normal daughter of knights with whom I can live my life in peace. That’ll be enough.” Courtesy of Zola, I was painfully aware of the misery awaiting me if I dared covet a woman of high status.
I was determined to ensure my life from here on out would be no different than it had been thus far. Or, hey, it might even be happier.

***

Dad called me to his office to drop a veritable bomb on my head.
“Huh…?”
“Why are you surprised?” he asked. “You found and cleared a yet undiscovered dungeon. You also uncovered a Lost Item and a brand-new floating island.”

A letter from the palace lay on his desk, addressed to me. Given my achievements as an adventurer, I was being granted the provisional title of baron—conditional on the expectation that I would achieve knighthood during my schooling.
“Wh-why?!” I demanded, panicked.
“I just told you why,” Dad huffed in exasperation. “And remember, once you graduate, I won’t be able to accept you as a vassal like we planned.”
My dad was a baron himself, and the Kingdom of Holfort’s legal hierarchy dictated that the only people who could serve as a baron’s vassal were knights or baronets.
“But my territory isn’t big enough to qualify as a barony!” I protested.
“I know that!” Dad snapped. He was just as flustered as I was. He’d thought the Kingdom was just going to grant me independence as a knight. At best, he anticipated a baronetcy.
“Don’t tell me this counts for the academy, too?” I asked.
He grimaced. “You’ll have to attend classes suitable to your new rank.”
Academy classes were split into two: one for the heirs of noble families and another for general students. These were usually children of vassal families—knights and baronets who served a noble family—or second and third sons who weren’t heirs to any land or titles. Families of especially high rank might go ahead and send their second and third sons to the higher classes, but rural nobles didn’t have the finances. This didn’t apply to daughters, of course. Girls from noble families entered the higher class regardless of their family’s financial circumstances.
Nicks was in the general class. And normally I would have been, too. I had counted on it, given my plans for independence.
That was out the window now.
“If possible…I’d rather be in the general class,” I still tried.
“You don’t get a choice,” Dad said. “You’re the heir to a barony. You need the appropriate education for it, whether you like it or not.”
“But what about a bride?!”
“You’ll have to find a wife from a prominent family.”
I sank to my knees in despair. “Noooo! Why is this happening to meeee?”
“Idiot, don’t cry about it! There aren’t *that* many women like Zola out there. You’ll meet plenty of nice girls at the academy…probably.”
He didn’t even believe himself!
“Girls from baronies and earldoms are literal landmines. Hell no. Nope, count me out!”
“Don’t call them that! There’ll be no end of trouble if they hear you. Besides, your sisters are all daughters of a barony. Do they really seem that terrible to you?”
“They’re absolute witches!” I stared at him in disbelief. “I just want a nice, quiet girl. Noblewomen are out of the question!”
Dad scrubbed his hands over his face. But surely he could see where I was coming from. I had seen my sisters. Okay, they were from the countryside,

but they still said things like, Men are just there for financial support. If I want a good-looking man, I'll search elsewhere. Or maybe I'll get a slave! Hey, Daddy, I want an elf lover, too—uh, I mean, a personal servant!
My oldest sister had already used family money to buy her own slave, and the younger one was envious. Even my mom was upset over this incident, which had unfolded while Nicks was home from the academy. He, my dad, and I had all watched the scene with abject horror. My female siblings were nothing short of evil.
I hugged my knees to my chest and sat there, drowning. The happiness I planned for had been stolen away.
My dad frowned at me. "It's not all bad. The crown prince and other prominent heirs will be in the same year as you. You'll have a chance to build fortuitous connections with them."
"I'll be nothing more than background noise to them." Princes from otome games always liked ordinary girls. They didn't care for other nobles. The stereotype fueled my cynicism.
"You don't have to say it like that," he chided. "Look, our territory is doing so much better thanks to you. Two more years of this and we'll be in an even better place."
He was clearly distressed by my devastation, so I apologized. But as far as I could tell, my future now seemed pretty grim.

***

Holfort Kingdom's capital was situated in the middle of the country, complete with an ancient dungeon and monsters continually surging from its depths. This dungeon was a treasure trove of special items, including magical stones. It was a valuable resource, and one of the key reasons why Holfort had become such a prominent nation.
Overall, the continent was vast and its lands fertile. The people drew from the sea to service the main continent, and the floating islands did the same for their territories. I had no idea how filtration worked, but given the game's overall paper-thin worldbuilding, I wouldn't get anywhere nitpicking the details.
Still, I had to admire the beauty, and the size of the royal capital boggled. The urban district alone housed upwards of a million people. Being equipped with sewers and electricity, it really resembled a modern-day city. This was the location of the academy.
At the start of the new term, Nicks, our sister Jenna, and I sailed into the capital from the countryside, docking at a floating island not far from the urban district. We rode on a new airship I had bought my parents to replace the one I crashed. It was fifty meters long, with a deck on the upper level, and covered in armor. It kind of looked like a submarine.

Nicks, a third-year at the academy, lifted his travel bag and yawned. “It’s nice being able to come here straight from home. Beats taking the regular service and having to transfer along the way.”
Our older sister, Jenna, was a second-year. She was a brunette, and obsessed with the latest fashion in the capital. Her new slave, a cat-eared demi-human with a slim yet muscular form, wore a suit far more expensive than anything Nicks and I had packed.
“A more glamorous airship would have been better,” Jenna huffed. “My friends all have luxurious passenger ships. I hate that I’m the only one who has to ride in something so cheap.”
First of all, it’s not your ship. Second of all, if you hate it, then don’t freakin’ ride on it. If only I could say that to her face.
Nicks averted his eyes. “How is it that our mom’s fine,” he said to me quietly, “but all of her daughters are…*this*?”
We grabbed our luggage and headed for the regular service platform that would take us into the urban district. Jenna followed, her servant carrying her bags for her.
“Hey, are you two listening to me?” she said petulantly. “Leon, if you’re really that rich, pay up—you have no idea how much my entertainment expenses cost.”
“Hey,” I said to Nicks, “how about we just tell the academy you were the one who found the island and all the treasure? You take the credit and go to the higher class, huh?”
“I haven’t fallen so low as to steal my younger brother’s achievements,” he said at once. “Besides, I don’t want to go to the higher class, either. You know it’s full of women like that.”
We both turned to glance at Jenna, still whining as she trailed behind us.
“She used family money to buy herself a freakin’ slave, that wench…” I growled.
The slave glared daggers at me. His twitching cat ears sure were sensitive.
Nicks clapped me on the shoulder. “She’s been influenced by the higher class. You gotta understand that.”
Status among the higher class was determined by what you wore and what you owned and whether you had a slave or not. The opposite was true for men; if they dressed gaudily or dared to have a female slave, they were treated like pariahs.
“You know,” Nicks began a bit awkwardly, “it’s thanks to you I can focus on my studies instead of getting a part-time job. My chances of getting a partner are looking good, too. …I just wanted to say I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”
“Great, then repay me by—”
“I’m not going to take your place in the higher classes,” he interrupted.
“Oh, by the way, you better memorize this platform… It’s easy to get lost here.”

The airship harbor was akin to what a bus terminal or train station looked like in my previous world. Nicks led us to the appropriate terminal where we were to board the next ship. Dozens of other students waited there already. About half of them seemed to be from families ranging from knights to viscounts. Anyone from an earldom or higher had their own private dock within the capital.

As we waited, the regular service ship finally arrived. Jenna moved to board, disgruntled, but for some reason stopped in a panic. Similarly, Nicks put a hand to his forehead.

"What is it?" I asked in confusion.

He pointed into the crowd. "Those are followers of one of the ducal houses."

Several people boldly cut in front of others to board the ship. The women of the group led the way with handsome slaves at their heel. Men followed last.

Jenna looked angry. "A bunch of bigwig noble kids are enrolling this year. Looks like they brought their entourages with them."

The academy operated on the premise that all students were treated equally, despite the two separate levels of classes, but outside status and authority still had an impact at the school. Once they graduated, these vassals would be supporting high-ranking nobility. They weren't accompanied by their masters today, but they still brazenly cut in line. A few of them traded glares with one another; I guess cliques form no matter your rank.

"Aha…" I nodded. "So they're a bunch of small fries with big heads on their shoulders because they've got someone stronger backing them."

Nicks panicked. "Moron!"

"Are you an idiot?!" Jenna joined in. "You must be!"

They were worried the duke's followers might have heard me, but when no one turned to look our way, my brother and sister both sighed in relief.

"Those demi-human slaves can pick up just about everything you say," Nicks warned me. "You need to be more cautious. If they hear you, you'll be in deep trouble."

I apologized. "I'll be more discreet in the future."

Jenna was still perturbed. "I mean it, be careful. I won't let you live it down if you cause me trouble while you're here."

You little brat, you were only thinking about yourself.

And so we were stuck waiting until another bus-sized airship came to pick us up.

***

Despite the high population density of the urban district, the academy's campus opened wide before us. The buildings were colossal, of course, but the scale of the dormitories also impressed.

Nicks and I separated; he had to go to the general class's dormitory, and unfortunately, I was assigned to the higher class's dorm. Suddenly my feet felt a lot heavier…

The dorm was much more luxurious than I would have expected. Even the entrance looked more like a hotel lobby, complete with a receptionist waiting at a desk. Uniformed employees moved briskly to and fro.

"Wow, this place looks just like it did in the game," I mumbled.

My impression? Extravagant. That's it. If I'd been more excited about attending the academy, I might have had more to say. Alas, this was basically a prison for me. Nothing to fawn over but some elaborate background art come to life.

I gave the receptionist my information.

"Ah yes, Lord Leon Fou Bartfort, your room is located here." The receptionist showed me a map and handed me a key. "Please be sure to peruse through the dormitory rulebook. If you have any issues, please alert the person in charge."

Just then, another student came up behind me and brushed me aside, a group of lackeys fanning out behind him. "Hey. Show me to my room right now."

He wasn't *that* high status—just a rich viscount—but when the receptionist heard his name, they bowed their head low. "Welcome to the dormitory! We'll guide you to your room immediately. Please allow us to take your luggage…"

The difference in our treatment was profound. Despite my wealth, I was still unknown, and Bartfort House lacked size. There was definitely a kind of caste system at play; one's school popularity factored into it, of course, but your family's territory and power influenced your status the most.

"I want to go home already," I whined as I dragged myself through the corridors alone. I arrived at the room I would be using for the next three years and let myself in with my key. It was a single and not exactly a spacious one at that—clean, though, and my luggage awaited me. I opened one of the boxes, only to realize my textbooks and notebooks already lay on the desk.

"Three years, huh…?"

I flipped through one of the textbooks. It was about magic, and so advanced that I couldn't make heads or tails of it. For such a flippant game, it sure had some mechanics ironed out to the most annoyingly minute detail.

A voice piped up from inside my bag, "If we have arrived, I would appreciate you letting me out now."

I promptly opened the bag and Luxion floated out, his big red eye scanning over the interior of the room.

"Oh, sorry. I forgot about you," I told him.

"Of course you did, Master. Your memory is utterly praiseworthy."

I sighed at his usual sarcasm as I arranged my things. "So, how was the trip?"

“Nothing about our air travel warrants comment. The magical technology astounded, but nothing about it could not be replicated just as well with science… I will continue to investigate regardless.”
In other words, something *had* piqued his interest.
“For an AI, you sure hide your true feelings. You trying to play games with me?”
“Play games? Are you treating me like a woman? I’m afraid I’ll disappoint you, Master. No concept of gender exists for my kind.”
You really piss me off.
I forced back the urge to smack to smack him—it—whatever. Fortunately, he drifted off on his own, so I resumed unpacking.
Just then, I heard a knock on the door.

***

I found myself in an upscale bar off of school grounds, dragged from the student dorm along with the other first-years by a bunch of upperclassmen.
“Uh, so…I’m truly happy to be able to welcome all the new students this year.” The boy addressing us was the heir of a barony. “Not so long ago, I was in your shoes.”
Our upperclassmen hosts were all from poor, rural noble houses. I’d realized all of the underclassmen were from the same background as well.
Another first-year, by the name of Daniel Fou Durland, stood next to me. He looked healthy, with his finely tanned skin and short hair. His tall, muscled body also contributed to a positive first impression. If I had to talk to anyone, might as well be him.
“What’s the point of this welcome party anyway?” I asked him.
“Don’t you know?” He tilted his head at me. “If we’re a real group with solid bonds, we can consult each other when we have problems and share vital information. You know how important it is to get married, right?”
It certainly would make some things easier to be part of a group, but if a promising young lady appeared, I had no doubt a fight would break out.
When I said as much, another guy joined our chat. He sat across from us and introduced himself a Raymond Fou Arkin. He looked the complete opposite of Daniel; his glasses gave the impression of intelligence, but he came across as a killjoy. He pushed his spectacles up his nose.
“Even if a fight over a girl did break out, as long as she’s dating a guy within our group, no one will lose their minds over it,” he said loftily. “In the case of an argument, it’s settled by the group. Besides, fights over women are apparently quite rare.”
Once the upperclassman finished his speech, the feast began. The third- and second-years were footing the bill, or so I’d heard. That meant next year, it would be our turn to treat our underclassmen.
“I was looking forward to meeting the highly acclaimed and successful adventurer joining us this year,” said an upperclassman, approaching me.

“I’m Lucle, by the way. Happy to make your acquaintance. We’re expecting great things from you, newbie.”
He was a third-year and seemed pretty laid-back, as he’d already found a marriage partner and no longer had anything to worry about. He just had to cruise to graduation and return to his territory.
“Expecting great things?” I echoed quizzically.
He clicked his tongue. “Come on, don’t act like you don’t know. I heard about the baron’s third son who became an adventurer and accomplished numerous feats of derring-do before even enrolling. That’s gotta be you, right? It’s not just the capital that’s heard. Word spread all the way to my parents’ territory.”
Daniel, still nearby, seemed surprised. “Wait, the guy in the rumors is you?”
I glanced away. “Not like I had a choice. It was either make some money or be shipped off to marry some perverted old lady.”
That seemed to explain things. No one pursued the matter any further. Still, it was definitely easier to talk to them than I’d expected, given how we shared the same anxieties. Honestly, we talked more about marriage than our upcoming education. We were all desperate to secure an engagement while we were in school.
I finally decided to ask something that was weighing on my mind. “You know, the oldest son of our house graduated last year. Was he in this group, too, while he was here? His name is Rutart.”
“Oh, that guy? No, he wasn’t one of ours. Said he didn’t accept invitations from the dregs of the school.”
Rutart, you idiot, your status isn’t any different from mine!
“He worked his way into a group of people whose fathers were at least viscounts, if not higher,” Lucle explained. “Seemed like he was really pushing himself to fit in. But hey, to each their own. Are you two close?”
I shook my head.
“Yeah, I figured.” Lucle threw back a mug of beer. “There’s only a few days left until the entrance ceremony. I’ll give you a tour of the capital in the meantime. Just be careful you don’t have too much fun and wear yourselves out.”
Daniel, Raymond, and I nodded.
Lucle’s expression turned grim. “Also, I heard there’s a scholarship student joining us this year. The academy said something about wanting exceptional students, so they’re letting someone of common birth enroll.”
Raymond sneered. Daniel didn’t look too pleased either. Perhaps that was a natural reaction for anyone from a noble house to have.
“A scholarship student?” Raymond repeated. “In the general class, right?”
Lucle shook his head. “No, the higher class. And we already have the crown prince enrolling at the same time, which is enough of a pain. The scholarship student is a girl, or so I heard. No connections at all. No clue what the real story is. Everyone’s really curious about her. If you find out something, could you let me know?”

She's going to be the center of everything at this school this year, I thought, since she's the protagonist of the game.

I wasn't surprised, but this common-born scholarship student was evidently quite the shock to Raymond and Daniel. How could she have no connections, they wondered aloud. She at least had to be the daughter of a wealthy merchant family. Probably knew someone high up in order to land a spot at the academy. I feigned agreement so as not to stand out.

In the game, this girl was supposedly the descendant of some special bloodline. Once the nobles discovered that, they'd started tripping over themselves to get on her good side. I'd keep my mouth shut about it, though. No one would believe me even if I told them, and I had no plans to get involved with her or the love interests anyway. The crown prince and his friends could enjoy their youth here in peace. That'd work out better for me, too.

***

On the day of the entrance ceremony, we gathered in a giant auditorium. I stifled yawns, trying not to inhale the awful smell. A number of women's perfumes had coalesced into something putrid that hung thick in the air. Was I going to have to get used to that, too?

Crown Prince Julius Rapha Holfort, a boy with short, navy-blue hair, gave a speech as representative of the new students. As first in line to inherit the throne, he was the only prince that ever appeared in the game, and was referred to most often as simply "the prince." Handsome, tall, and slightly muscular, his skin was beautiful and his eyes—the same navy-blue as his hair—shone brightly. I could understand why all the girls around me breathed wistful sighs as they watched him.

It's like he's from a different dimension.

Daniel and Raymond sat close by, listening intently. Behind them, one voice seemed to stand out above the murmurs…

"So it's finally time. My prince, you've kept me waiting ten whole years."

I turned my head to try and locate the source of the voice, but so many girls were muttering about the prince's beauty that I couldn't really discern one from the other. The words hadn't even been spoken particularly loudly, they just seemed to stand out for some reason.

Finally, my eyes landed on one girl: petite, with long blonde hair flowing down her back, and blue eyes that glistened as she stared at the prince. I'd say her face was more cute than beautiful, but that gaze of hers bothered me. Everyone else regarded the prince with longing or adoration, but she watched him like a beast locked onto its prey.

Otherwise, she was dainty and somewhat immature-looking. Compared to some of our other classmates, she might even be plain. Only the glint in her eyes made her seem oddly…unbalanced.

Daniel glanced at me. “What? Did you find someone? Oh, she’s cute. Is that your type?”
I shook my head. “No. If anything, I hate girls like her.” I turned my attention back to the prince but found myself strangely unable to settle back down.
“Really? I think she’s pretty cute, though.”
The first thing I felt when I saw her was anger. I had no idea what could have sparked such irritation. Not hatred…it was something more twisted and complex.
Regardless, I definitely couldn’t ever see her in a romantic light.

Chapter 4:
The Protagonist and the Villainess

SEVERAL WEEKS PASSED after the entrance ceremony. Since I was just a background character, there were no real events of any note for me to trigger or whatever, and I started to get used to my daily life at the academy.

In terms of the game's time line, the protagonist should have encountered all her potential love interests by now and established all the prerequisites for romancing them. She was probably actually growing close to at least one of them already. The villainess—the rival character—had probably already made her debut, telling the protagonist, "Know your place, commoner!"

I'd started skipping over the game text after my first play-through, so I didn't really remember the details of the story all that well. Regardless, the protagonist's actions weren't going to impact me. And who knew? Perhaps the *real* protagonist was even more cunning than her game counterpart. Best to steer clear.

Anyway, I was growing accustomed to life at the dorm and enjoyed talking to Daniel and Raymond. We were all in a similar situation, after all, and had grown up in almost identical circumstances. Today, we were seated together on a bench in the school's courtyard, discussing the tea party coming up at the beginning of May.

"I guess we should be picking who to invite, right?" Daniel asked worriedly. "What are you going to do?"

Women got to relax during the long holiday in May, but not so the men. Society expected us to take the opportunity of a break to invite a girl to an elaborate tea and get closer to her. And I'm not talking the kind of party where you indiscriminately invited every girl you knew. We were making overtures to check compatibility with potential partners.

While technically an unofficial event, we held the parties within school property. A course scheduled in advance taught men how to properly entertain a woman and behave like gentlemen. Those classes started at the beginning of our May holiday.

Raymond looked down at his lap. "My parents sent me some allowance, but there's no way I can hold a fancy tea party. I don't care what girl attends, as long as someone does."

The academy sure got expensive. They required no payment for tuition, room, board, or daily expenses, but men paid a dear, dear cost.

I had savings, but I couldn't treat those funds like a bottomless well from which I could freely pump. I didn't especially want to use *any* of it, if my only aim was to get in a woman's good graces.

On the other hand, if you didn't hold a party, women had their own whisper network, just like we had our own group for solidarity. Everyone would know if you skipped out—even if you didn't have anyone you particularly wanted to invite. *He doesn't even hold tea parties*, they would say, or any other malicious rumor that popped into their head. It would inevitably damage your chances of getting married at all; men took a hit if they committed any faux pas.

Thus, the current problem.

My accomplishments had landed me in a position where I would be fully independent upon graduation, and everyone viewed me as relatively wealthy. *Someone* had told them about those mountains of gold and silver treasure. Which meant…

"I have to hold a ridiculously formal tea party," I moaned. "At least, that's what I was told. I'm dreading this whole thing."

As the three of us commiserated, we spotted Prince Julius sauntering through the courtyard with his procession of female flunkies. A few men tagged proudly along behind them—heirs of earldoms. The prince was also accompanied by his foster brother and best friend, an heir to a viscount house working within the royal guard. His name was Jilk Fia Marmoria. He had long, dark, forest-green hair. I almost wanted to ask him if he dyed it. His green eyes sloped down at the edges, giving him a far more gentle appearance than the prince he served. His Highness's eyes were sharp. Despite Jilk's relatively low status, being close to the prince guaranteed he'd receive an important post in the future once he graduated.

The girls had hearts in their eyes as they chattered at the two men.

"Your Highness, will you be holding a tea party in May?"

"I'd like to join."

"M-me, too!"

The girls looked like a bunch of puppies wagging their tails in excitement. It was a cold, hard look at reality for the rest of us.

Raymond covered his face with his hands. "With the prince and the other high-ranking nobility at the academy this year, the standards are going to be insane."

Daniel's shoulders slumped. "They're definitely going to compare us. Ugh, please have mercy."

We watched in envy as the prince basked in the attention. Suddenly, a woman appeared, followed by an enormous contingent. It was immediately apparent she was of high birth.

Her name was Angelica Rapha Redgrave. Her gleaming blonde hair was pulled back in a bun, the perfect complement to her beautiful white skin. Her red eyes exuded strength, her piercing gaze said clearly that she possessed something most did not. If some people in this world really were born to be special, then she and the prince definitely numbered among them.

Cliché as it was, I found myself thinking the protagonist had to possess the same sort of extraordinary quality. I was sure that when I spotted her, she'd have an air that would set her apart from the rabble. Otherwise, it would be impossible for her to sway the feelings of the crown prince and the rest of the love interests.
"The prince's betrothed…?"
The girls surrounding the prince and Jilk made way for Angelica. None of them were foolish enough to make advances in her presence. I just wanted to tell all of them not to bother in the first place.
Angelica's eyes narrowed. "Your Highness, I would like to speak to you regarding your tea party in May. Would you permit me to join?"
We were warned against using our social positions or our parents' authority to influence life at the academy. It wasn't a realistic expectation; some things couldn't be ignored.
Prince Julius breathed a sigh. "Angelica, drop the intimidation act. This is the academy."
"I am aware. But this fuss and bother you trail has begun to grate." School grounds or not, Angelica was the daughter of a duke. No one was stupid enough to defy her.
"So that's the protagonist's rival, huh? She does look formidable," I muttered to myself.
Suddenly, I noticed a girl standing apart from the crowd. The moment I spotted her, my eyes narrowed. Where Angelica stunned with exquisite beauty, this blonde-haired, blue-eyed viscount's daughter came off as dainty and cute. Marie Fou Lafan.
I just couldn't get over my unease about this girl. Looking at her made my hackles rise. It wasn't hate—it was something more complex. I couldn't put it into words.
Jilk noticed Marie's gaze and got the prince's attention. "Your Highness…"
"Hmm? Oh. Marie, perfect timing." The prince smiled at her. "I was looking for you. Would you join me?"
Angelica's brows twitched, then furrowed as one of her followers whispered in her ear.
The tension hung thick in the air. Most people would have read the room and stayed back, despite the prince's invitation. Marie stepped forward.
This standoff unfolded just a few meters from our bench. Daniel wrapped his arms around his stomach as if about to be sick. "Can…I just go home?"
Raymond slightly shook his head. "No. We'd attract attention if we tried to move. So that's the girl from the rumors, huh?"
"You know about her, Raymond?" I asked under my breath.
"You really don't know?" Raymond looked at me in surprise. "The story's pretty infamous by now. Marie slapped Prince Julius across the face."
Daniel was flabbergasted. "You're kidding, right? That's not what I heard. I heard she was eating lunch with a prominent nobleman, and she ordered a steak and ate it like she'd never seen a knife and fork before."

It was Raymond's turn to be taken aback. "Seriously? I hadn't heard that one. But the one about her slapping the prince is definitely true. Apparently Prince Julius just laughed it off."
Maybe the prince could shrug off being slapped in the face, but surely the rest of the nobility couldn't dismiss it. And for a noblewoman to have such poor table manners…
Hey, wait.
"A slap…and a steak?"
That sounded familiar, somehow. Had I heard these rumors before? I couldn't remember.
Marie's adorable voice cut through my thoughts. "You called for me, Your Highness?"
"Boys at the school will be holding tea parties in May. I don't want to do anything too elaborate, so I planned to just invite acquaintances. I was hoping you would join me."
"Prince Julius," Angelica objected, "there are *regulations*. I don't mean to say that you *must* have an elaborate party, but it ought to be at a scale appropriate to your status."
Then I had it—well, I had something: this was one of the main story events in the game, wasn't it? But the protagonist didn't seem to be present. Curious, I surveyed the area.
Raymond noticed my distraction. "What are you doing?"
"I'm just looking for someone… Is the scholarship student around?"
He glanced about, then shook his head. "Nope. Besides, she wouldn't hang out here. Now be quiet and watch. We have to hold out until the storm passes."
Other students had attempted to enter the courtyard, only to notice the tension in the air and turn on their heels. I envied their ability to escape.
"Enough, Angelica!" the prince snapped. "This is the *academy*. I'm just another student here. You may be my betrothed, but that doesn't give you the right to interfere in my life."
Angelica's pinky twitched, and she inclined her head. "I overstepped my bounds."
With those words, she stepped back, though she glowered at Marie. Then she took her leave, her entourage sneering at Marie as they followed.
"I'm sorry, Marie," Julius said. "I hope that didn't upset you."
"N-no, I'm fine. But are you really sure it's okay for me to attend your party?"
"The prince isn't fond of formalities. He wants to hold a more casual affair. We would love for you to join us," Jilk shrugged, then chuckled. "Plus, this is the first time I've seen the prince be so insistent on inviting a lady."
Embarrassed, the prince averted his gaze. "A-anyway, I do hope you'll come. Let's go, Jilk."

As the prince and Jilk began to withdraw, their little minions followed close behind. Unlike Angelica’s followers, their expressions were conflicted as they glanced at Marie.
Daniel and Raymond breathed a sigh of relief that we were finally free, but I kept my gaze trained on Marie. No one else had seen it, but for a fraction of a second, she relaxed her facade. A smirk crossed her face.
I finally peeled my eyes away, followed my two friends, and left.

***

On the first day of etiquette class for the tea parties, our professor looked the flawless gentleman. With his hair cleanly swept back, he stood tall and slender in his well-fitted suit.
Tables were scattered about the room with sweets and tea already prepared.
“Listen carefully,” he said. “Assume a woman pays attention to every detail when you invite her for tea. From your bearings and demeanor, she can determine your level of education and the nature of your very person. If you entertain her properly, she will leave with a favorable impression of you.”
All of the first-year boys gathered close to learn.
My big ol’ dad and his big bushy beard had also learned the meticulous etiquette necessary for tea parties, but he claimed he’d forgotten all of it after he graduated. Did women really care how a man poured tea and whatnot? I mean, these were the same women that paraded their demi-human slave lovers around just to show them off. And we were the ones who needed to class it up?
“You there, Mister Leon! You need to take this seriously. Focus!” the professor scolded.
“Y-yes, sir!”
The wealthy heirs and scions of court nobles snickered.
“What do you expect of a country bumpkin?”
“Got a big head on his shoulders just because he distinguished himself a little.”
“An uncivilized barbarian doesn’t belong here. Adventuring better suits his ilk.”
The professor straightened his spine and resumed instruction. “Above all else, you must attend to your party’s atmosphere. Simply gathering the necessary supplies and securing an empty room is no reason to be complacent! Each cup, each plate—every single piece requires your utmost consideration. The occasion must feel special. If you stop at the basics, you’re not good enough to even be considered third-rate!”
What was the point of such a meaningless class? When I graduate, I’m never going to use this stuff again.
The professor must have read my mind. “Mister Leon, it seems you still do not comprehend. Allow me to demonstrate what a true tea party looks like for you.”
He made good on his threat and called me up in front of the class.
Whatever. I had no interest in tea—nor had I ever. I didn’t see the point in expensive dried weeds and so on. The cheap stuff was just as good, right? But if the professor was going to role-play hosting me, I’d just have to pretend to be impressed while I mocked him on the inside.
“Oh yay, I’m so looking forward to it,” I said with fake enthusiasm.

The professor adjusted his neck collar, eager to display his skill.
“Wonderful. Please enjoy.”
Go ahead and brag to me about your fancy leaves and tooth-rotting sweets. I’ll feign interest and laugh at you all the while.
I was so sure that was how things would go…

***

As soon as class finished, I raced to flag down the instructor. “Professor! I was truly moved!”
He held his head up high, his movements graceful as he peered over his shoulder and stroked his fingers over his finely trimmed mustache.
Holy crap… Even the way he turned was gentlemanly!
“Mister Leon… So it seems you finally understand.”
Indeed, I was mortified. “Yes! I completely underestimated the wonder of tea. To be honest, I mocked it. I’m so ashamed, but I swear to do better in the future. I hope to one day hold a tea party as perfect as the one you just demonstrated, Professor!”
He smiled. “That’s wonderful, but you’re mistaken about one thing.”
“What?”
The professor turned his entire body to face me, then rested his right hand over his chest. The way he moved was so inhumanly elegant. “Above all else, you must desire to entertain. I have yet to feel satisfied with my own performance. I am still very much on my own journey to perfection.”
“N-no way,” I gasped. “You’re not perfect?”
He nodded. “Unfortunately I am not, despite my goal to entertain my guests to my utmost ability. However, I *can* still teach you the foundations of the art. Mister Leon, let us walk together on this path to tea mastery!”
“Yes, Prof—I mean, yes, Master!”
As my prof—*master* and I continued to chat, I could hear Daniel and Raymond muttering behind me.
“Did Leon hit his head or something?”
“Who knows? I mean, this stuff can only help him, so who cares, right?”

***

I sent out an invitation for the May tea party, and after receiving an affirmative response, I borrowed a room from the school and began my preparations. A number of special rooms were made available at the school, and it was common for students to borrow them to entertain guests. I might have preferred a more appropriate venue for my new art, but given the constraints of the tradition, I settled for the on-campus site.
After consulting with my master, I assembled a tea set, tea leaves, and hors d’oeuvres for the party. Then I set about cleaning the room and setting

everything meticulously in place. All that remained was to wait for my guest to arrive.
Luxion floated in the middle of the room, examining my work. “You really put effort into this. Hard to believe you’re the same person who was plotting to send in a professional to handle it for you just a few weeks ago.”
“Put a cork in it. If you see anything amiss, let me know.” I ran a final check over everything before slipping out my pocket watch to check the time. The lady I had invited was the second daughter of a baron.
“I truly cannot comprehend you new humans,” Luxion said. “Couldn’t you just examine gene compatibility and pick the most appropriate partner that way?”
“Kind of hard to do when no one here can examine people’s genes.”
“Then I have nothing more to say.”
Just then, the lady walked in. “Heya.”
“Greetings, miss, welcome to…uh?”
Her attitude was so casual, but that wasn’t what threw me; two girls I hadn’t invited followed behind her, tittering.
“They’re my friends,” the baron’s daughter said breezily. “We figured we’d kill some time together. We’re invited to a huge tea party by the heir of the Field earldom, but we still have some time before we have to leave.”
The heirs of the elite families hosted tea parties that were utterly massive compared to what the rest of us were doing, complete with carriages to ferry their guests.
“O-oh, I didn’t realize. Well then, what time will you be leaving?” I asked.
“In about thirty minutes. We were bored out of our minds when I suddenly remembered I’d accepted an invitation from you.”
The two tagalongs dragged over their own chairs, then plopped down and started chowing down on the hors d’oeuvres.
“Have some tea as well,” I offered.
With the three of them crowded around the table, I had nowhere to sit. They chatted animatedly among themselves about the upcoming party. I basically acted as their servant, filling tea cups and hauling out more sweets.
In exactly half an hour, they stood up from their mess and started toward the door.
“Well, see ya,” the baron’s daughter said. “The snacks were okay, but if you can’t afford anything better than that, girls aren’t going to like you. Be more careful next time, ’kay?”
As if she’d done me some great service with this “advice,” she left with her friends, babbling as they headed for the Field heir’s party. They didn’t even thank me for my hospitality.
“I had these snacks prepared fresh today from a really good store. It cost me a mint, and they want me to spend even *more*?” My shoulders slumped. I stared down at the table covered in dirty plates and cups, then gazed up at the ceiling. “Master, the path to tea mastery seems to be a long and treacherous one.”

I set about cleaning the mess, tears of frustration pricking my eyes. Suddenly, I heard voices outside…like a number of female students bickering.

“You don’t deserve to attend!”

“B-but I received an invitation—”

“That was merely courtesy. Have some sense, commoner!”

The echo of a dozen footsteps faded as one of the ladies admonished her companions, “The Field heir’s party will start without us if we don’t hurry.”

Could this “commoner” be the game’s protagonist? I peeked out my door. I anticipated a beauty with an impressive aura, not unlike Angelica, but the girl sitting on the floor in the middle of the hallway betrayed all my expectations.

Her blondish-brown hair was cropped in a mid-length bob. There was nothing charismatic or commanding about her. Her eyes were blue mixed with green, and she had soft facial features. The complete opposite of her programmed rival.

I mean, she was pretty. But she was…ordinary.

“Maybe she’s the type that needs a little work to truly shine?” I muttered to myself. “Still, she’s way more subdued than I thought she’d be.”

She was staring at a shredded invitation on the floor.

Luxion, who'd pretended to be mere decor as he watched what transpired at my tea party, hovered over my shoulder. "This is what you humans refer to as bullying, yes? A scholarship student who's not a noble… No doubt many students are displeased to have a commoner in their midst."
"Seems that way."
The dejected girl started collecting the pieces of her torn-up invitation.
I glanced over my shoulder, peering back inside my room. "I guess I still have the supplies for one more guest."
I just couldn't leave the girl alone, you know? Not when she looked so devastated.
"Hey, you! Up for some tea?" I asked casually, like some player trying to pick up girls.
The protagonist lifted her face and stared at me in surprise.

***

This time, it actually *felt* like a tea party.
"Huh, so you got invited to the Field heir's party, too."
"Yes," she replied. "He said it might be interesting to talk to a scholarship student and invited me along, but everyone else said I have no business showing up…since I'm a commoner."
I popped one of the sweets into my mouth, enjoying the fragrance of the tea as we chatted. It had taken a little coaxing to get the protagonist—her name was Olivia—to try anything. But now as she ate, her face lit up and all traces of sadness vanished. My mood brightened knowing my efforts hadn't been entirely in vain.
She hesitated when she looked at the tea. "This is really expensive, isn't it? Are you sure it's okay for me to drink this?"
Her modesty gave me pause. Who's the Japanese jerkass who accused her of being calculating?!
"Eh, it's too much for me to drink on my own. You'd be doing me a favor," I assured her. "Anyway, it sounds like you're having a really tough time."
I wasn't exactly planning on getting involved with her—the opposite, in fact—but I was curious about which love interest she was pursuing. It wouldn't hurt to know what route the protagonist was going down. Whoever she hooked up with would have some level of impact on my life…maybe.
Yeah, actually, none whatsoever.
So what? I was curious who she was going to end up with. Sue me.
"I was really excited about being invited to the Field heir's party but I guess there's no hope, is there?" She looked depressed.
Brad Fou Field would inherit an earldom at the edge of the kingdom. Thanks to his long purple hair, the arrogant jerk stood out in a crowd. As one of the elite nobles, his family owned a vast spread of land with an

enormous manor—suffice to say, they oozed wealth. Bartfort House couldn't compare.
Brad did more as a strategist than a frontline soldier. An advisor, you might say, someone intelligent, with the brains to lead military forces. In the game, I thought of him as the magic-obsessed narcissistic prick with an inferiority complex.
While Brad excelled in magic, his comparative lack of skill in close combat shamed him. Regional lords loved to brag about their prowess in martial arts. They preferred brawn to brains, and they measured themselves by their skill in piloting Armor. Brad came from a regional lordship and was self-conscious about his lack of physical ability. If someone brought it up, he exploded with rage.
More simply put, he was a pain in the ass.
Actually, wait. Now that I thought about, *all* of the love interests were annoying douchebags.
Olivia's face clouded over, and she gazed down at her lap. "Do you think maybe I should never have come here? I'm trying my best, really, but I'm only barely managing to keep up with everyone else. I don't even know why I was allowed to attend."
Oh yeah, at the beginning of the game, her stats were low and she really struggled at the academy.
Prince Julius and the rest of the love interest pricks helped cover for her in the game, but right now, Olivia seemed basically on her own. But why was she still fending for herself at this point in the timeline? Even if she hadn't triggered anything with other love interests, Prince Julius should have been looking out for her. Were things unfolding differently here in reality?
I shared no classes with Olivia, so the two of us had never really interacted, and I had no idea what was going on. I just assumed life was running smoothly for her, as it had in the game. Even if she didn't end up with Prince Julius for whatever reason, she would be fine as long as she got close with one of the other love interests.
But judging from what Olivia described, she'd been alone for almost a month now. Her situation was even more miserable than mine. Forget looking for a marriage partner, she didn't even have a friend. That had to be isolating.
The men from the elite families ignored her for her common status, and guys like me, desperately hunting for brides, didn't have time to waste associating with someone like her. The only reason the love interests bothered interacting with Olivia in the game was because they all already had fiancées (and man, I was envious). As for the other girls, they likely didn't understand why a commoner had even been allowed to attend the academy and begrudged her for it. Olivia was in a tough spot.
But something was odd about this. Olivia really should have met all of the love interests by now. The introduction events were compulsory; you couldn't even skip them in gameplay.

Then, for some reason, I remembered Marie…and that eerie smirk I'd glimpsed on her face.
"Uh, um…" Olivia seemed flustered at my silence. "I-I'm sorry if I spoke inappropriately!"
Honestly, I wished the other girls at the academy would learn from her example. She was a goddess. Really, who was the other-life scumbag who'd dared to accuse her of being calculating?! Who? I'd like to sock him in the pre-incarnated face.
"I was just doing a little thinking," I assured her. "At any rate, it's the first time we've ever had a scholarship student. I'm sure everyone is struggling to adjust, not just you. It's probably best not to overthink things right now."
It wasn't terribly groundbreaking advice. Just because I'd been a productive member of society in my previous life didn't mean I had earthshattering wisdom to impart.
Olivia nodded. "I guess you're right." She looked up at me. "Is it…really all right for me to be here?"
"Huh? Of course it is," I blurted. *You are the protagonist, after all.*
"Wh-why do you say that?" Olivia stammered. "People tell me every day that I don't belong."
"Uh, well, you know…" I admittedly had special knowledge about her situation, so perhaps my answer had seemed odd. I reached for the first thing that popped into my head. "The palace determined your enrollment. You shouldn't be fielding the complaints of the other students. *They* don't have any right to tell you whether you deserve to be here or not."
Olivia blinked. "B-but they all—"
"They should drop out if they can't handle it." I shrugged. "They can tell you to leave all they want, but the palace decided on you. Why not tell the students you'll forward their complaints to the relevant authorities? I doubt many would have a clever retort prepared for that."
And surely the love interests would protect her if she needed them. Everything would be fine. Probably.
Although after hearing how she'd spent her time at the academy thus far, I was a bit apprehensive. Were things really going to work out when she hadn't met any of the guys, let alone triggered the necessary events for their routes?
"I'd like to study magic more," Olivia mumbled. "But there's all these unwritten rules at the academy that I don't know about… Lately, people have been pulling pranks on me with my textbooks. It's been miserable."
I knew about unwritten rules. The boys at the academy had a number of them. No doubt the girls' were even more vicious.
It was a huge handicap to attend this institution without knowing those rules. Now that I thought about it, there was a scene in the game where the villainess accused the protagonist of not following them. In the game, the protagonist had the love interests to look out for her…but Olivia had no one in her corner.

I couldn't just abandon her. "I might know someone who's an expert on these rules," I said slowly. "I think I can help you out here."
"Really?!" Olivia beamed, her delight blinding.
Wasting no time, I called in my older sister. Jenna needed to make herself useful occasionally, after all. I'd just have to wave a little money about to get her moving. Even if she was reluctant, I was sure she'd share her knowledge eventually.

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I poured tea for Jenna. Honestly, I was tempted to use the cheapest leaves I could find or spike her drink, but then I pictured my master's face and decided against it. It would wound me too much to ruin a tea party with petty revenge.
Jenna sat there petulantly, her cat-eared servant standing behind her, arms folded. "Color me impressed that an uncivilized brute like you thought to summon me."
I snorted. "Color me impressed that you had enough sense to come when I called you. Now enough, hurry up and tell her about these weird rules."
I gestured at Olivia. For her part, Olivia looked a bit sheepish, glancing between us, but I remained unruffled as I took my own seat.
Jenna covered her forehead with her hand. "Fine. But tell me, what do you expect to get out of helping the scholarship student?"
Olivia's happiness would be the salvation of this country in the future. There was no downside to making sure she was in my debt. Besides, I'd bought Luxion to be her treasure, theoretically; this was the least I could do to compensate her.
"This is precisely why I hate people who only do things for personal benefit," I said. "Maybe you should learn about a little something called kindness, hmm?"
Jenna clicked her tongue. Then she seemed to remember that our family's newfound wealth was the only reason she had been able to purchase the stunning slave standing behind her. Turning her gaze to Olivia, she asked, "Did you pay the proper respects to the girls in your class? Or at least the most affluent girl?"
Olivia shook her head. "I can't even get close to her."
"Make sure to write her a letter. Delivering a gift and paying your respects is the first rule to which you must adhere. If her entourage is too large, then ask someone to be your intermediary. Find the girl with the most important position among her followers. Hand her the letter and ask her to deliver the gift while she's at it. And of course, you must research the girl's preferences before you acquire the gift."
"That's bribery!" I exclaimed.
"Oh, pipe down," Jenna huffed. "Bribery runs the world—and smoothly. Oh, and don't even think about giving her money. That's uncouth. You'll anger

her. Your safest bets are sweets or tea leaves from a popular store. If you screw this up, you'll only doom yourself."
Olivia was eagerly writing down notes, but her pen suddenly stopped. "I-I don't have that kind of money."
Jenna shot me a look. "Have this louse buy it for you. This whole tutoring session was his idea. Paying for you is the least he can do."
The surprise attack caught me off guard. I'd thought of myself as an unrelated bystander bearing witness to the rigors of womanhood. "Wh-what—"
Jenna continued, "If she asks to meet you directly or gives you a return gift, then you're in the clear. After that, just don't do anything to irritate her and you'll be safe until graduation."
Tears welled in Olivia's eyes, and she turned to look at me.
"Don't worry about it. I'll pay for you," I said.
"Thank you. I swear I'll pay you back!"
I wished the other academy girls knew how to express gratitude half so well. I glanced at Jenna—she was shoveling my hors d'oeuvres into her mouth.
Jenna caught me shaking my head in disgust and motioned to her servant. The cat-eared man reached toward me, but I scrambled out of the way. I was no match for a demi-human's strength. No way was I going to mess with that.

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A few days later, Angelica summoned Olivia to her quarters.
Angelica sipped her tea gracefully as she eyed the nervous commoner in front of her. The tea leaves were naturally of the highest quality, better than what most of the tea parties had probably served, even when their hosts had been trying to impress. Such was the norm for her.
"I have no idea who tipped you off, but I must compliment you for coming to pay your respects…eventually." Angelica returned her cup to its saucer and narrowed her eyes at Olivia. "You should spend your time here in a way appropriate to your station. Commoners like you don't belong at this academy. But as long as you understand that and quietly keep to yourself, I don't mind your attendance."
The academy insisted it was unique, cut off from the etiquette of the outside world in an effort to treat all students equally, but it had its own rules. Paying respects to Angelica was one of them. The academy didn't recognize the visit as compulsory, yet it was functionally so for those who wished to pass their school days in peace.
Olivia, with no power of her own and no one to support her, was obliged to follow every such rule. Inside the academy, she was beneath absolutely everyone.
"Uh, um, so you'll let me stay then?" Olivia asked with a note of concern.

What a question.
Angelica shooed her few followers out of the room, then addressed Olivia with a considerably softer tone. “You’re supposed to just drink your tea, nod, and go home. This would already be over if you’d just play your part. You’re making this complicated by asking questions.”
“Sorry…?”
Angelica sighed, exhaustion creeping over her. “It has nothing to do with me *allowing* you to be here. Do you really think I was the one trying to chase you out to begin with? I have no interest in the scholarship nonsense. To be honest, I have better things to do than bother with you.”
Olivia’s brows furrowed.
“You’re at least better than that woman who keeps trying to cuddle up to the prince,” Angelica muttered.
“Did you say something…?” Olivia asked.
“It’s nothing.” Angelica smiled faintly. She could be intense and had given in to her share of rage-fueled outbursts, but for now, she was simply curious about the girl in front of her. “Tell me, scholarship student, who was it who told you to come greet me? Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not asking because I begrudge them for it. It’s just that everyone seems to be keeping their distance from you.”
All of the boys were too busy hunting down marriage partners to bother with someone as pointless as Olivia, and all of the girls loathed her very presence. Angelica couldn’t help but wonder who, among all of them, would bother reaching out to help.
Olivia hesitated for a moment before finally admitting, “Leon. He introduced me to his older sister, who told me a few things.”
“The Bartfort family’s third son?” Angelica hummed thoughtfully. “He *is* an eccentric one. Though I don’t dislike him.”
“You know him?”
“You don’t? He’s famous, you know. One of the most promising of our generation, sure to be a knight.” Angelica smiled slightly. “In fact, I was shocked when I heard he’d managed to earn the rank of baron all on his own. As an adventurer, he accomplished what most only ever dream of. Truly impressive. His temperament doesn’t seem bad, either. Perhaps I should find an opportunity to speak with the prince about him.”
Olivia just stared at her, clearly mystified.

Chapter 5:
Noblemen's Etiquette

WHETHER THEY BELONGED to the academy's high or general class, every student was inducted into the Adventurers' Guild. This afforded the aristocrats an opportunity to get a taste of the suffering their ancestors had endured. Everyone had to register as an adventurer, regardless of gender, and per custom, had to make their way through a dungeon. And if you were from a poor noble family, adventuring was the perfect way to collect some extra coin.

The guild's course was popular at the academy. On weekends and long holidays, many of the male students went on adventures to reel in as much money as they could. Apparently, both my dad and Nicks had earned their fair share through adventuring. Although when I thought about how all that money went toward paying for tea parties and the like, I almost wanted to break down in tears.

I wasn't pressed for cash, but I was still excited about dungeons. It was one of the few features in this otome game that I had enjoyed. Or at least…I *had* been excited.

It was now the middle of May, and most of the first-year students had gathered to explore the depths of the capital's famous dungeon.

As I glanced around, I realized I was utterly out of place.

"I can't believe Raymond and Daniel abandoned me in my time of need," I muttered to myself. "Jerks. Not that I wouldn't have run, too, if I were in their positions, but still."

I was equipped with the gear typical of most adventurers. Beside me, adorned in the exact same style of armor, was Olivia. Thick plating covered our leather clothing, and iron guards protected our arms, chest, and shins. Honestly, it was vaguely stylish, perhaps because of the whole fantasy world aesthetic. However, a worrying number of students wore armor that forsook practicality in favor of chic and flair. As for me? I focused on safety. Compared to everyone else's, my attire went from "vaguely" stylish to thoroughly unfashionable.

Olivia shot me a guilty look. "I-I'm sorry. Miss Angelica insisted you come with us."

Grumbling at her wouldn't get me anywhere, not when she hated this as much as I did. I finally had my chance to explore a dungeon, but I'd landed in a group of elites.

A tall, slender man with light-blue hair, light-blue eyes, and a solemn face stood nearby. His own outfit was the epitome of style, though I had no idea how it was supposed to protect him. In the game, he was the cool love interest with glasses—ostensibly cool. He was actually quite worthless,

hence why I liked to call him Sir Four-Eyes the Useless. His real name was Chris Fia Arclight.
A single sword hung at Chris's waist. As a serious swordsman, he always fought on the frontlines—a Swordmaster, if you wanted to use game terminology. He hailed from one of the court noble families and was the heir of Holfort's Sword Saint, a man who'd cut his way to the top with his trusty blade.
In the game, Chris had something of a rivalry with another one of the love interests, a delinquent with spiked red hair. Greg Fou Seberg was the rugged type who preferred real battle experience to mere practice; he looked the part with his sleeves rolled up over suntanned, muscular forearms and a spear propped on his shoulder. By the time he enrolled at the academy, he'd already explored numerous dungeons and beat tens of monsters. He made for a splendid frontline fighter, but he was still the rich, pampered child of a regional earl.
If I remembered right, Chris and Greg had a friendship event midway through the game that improved their relationship. The event wasn't required to clear the game, but it did make things easier if you did. Naturally, I completed this BL-fantasy event over and over again each playthrough.
There were five total potential love interests for the heroine, each with their own signature color per the game: black for the crown prince, Julius Rapha Holfort; green for the prince's foster brother who was the heir to a viscounty, Jilk Fia Marmoria; purple for the narcissist with a talent for magic who was heir to an earldom, Brad Fou Field; blue for the son of the Sword Saint who was skilled with the blade in his own right and would soon be an earl himself, Chris Fia Arclight; and finally, red for the rough, blunt heir to an earldom who preferred the battlefield, Greg Fou Seberg. (Their middle names signified their status in Holfort Kingdom: Rapha was used for royalty, Fia for court nobles, and Fou for regional lords.)
Even flanked by dozens of followers, the strength of these five commanded the atmosphere of the room.
Actually, there should have been one more character here, a young elf named Kyle. He was a slave the protagonist bought for herself, her own personal servant. In the game, he took care of her needs, supported her in battle, and could update her on her progress with her love interests. But I didn't see him with us today. As he was a cute little-brother type, I never thought of him as anything more than the protagonist's minion.
You might be wondering why Olivia and I were here with this group. I'm sorry to say we had attracted their attention.
Olivia was a scholarship student, and therefore unusual, and I was an accomplished adventurer. The academy wanted me to act as an escort for Prince Julius. The nobles considered it gauche—an abuse of status, really—to bring soldiers or knights from your territory to the dungeon. But I was the same age, had already made a name for myself, and was part of the

student body. The academy didn't want to see any harm come to the kingdom's future monarch, and evidently Angelica had personally recommended me.

Still, we were only venturing to the first level of the beginner floors. The level of protection was overkill. Prince Julius realized it, too, if his disgruntled look was any indication. I recalled him telling the protagonist in the game that he hated this kind of thing.

Angelica and her group also joined us, of course. Custom—and our grades—compelled everyone to enter the dungeon regardless of gender. It was one of the few traditions that afforded women no preferential treatment.

We were a group of about thirty. It felt like too many, but we were basically going to sightsee. We'd probably be fine.

"The elites recruited us, but they haven't even bothered to say hi," I noted.

Olivia looked apprehensive. "Should we say it first?"

"Is it worth it? They'd just think we were butting in. Best keep our heads down and follow their lead."

I still couldn't help wondering which guy she was going to end up with, but I was hoping to find out from more of a distance.

Isn't it about time one of you got over here and started feeding her your cheesy romance lines? I thought, glancing at the five noblemen. Yet even as I had the idea, it bothered me. Why did I have to watch a decent woman like Olivia get it on with another dude?

I would just have to stomach it for the sake of all our futures. If she didn't hook up with one of them, who knew what could happen? We might all be screwed.

A professor stood in front of us. "All right, break off into teams. Once you reach the third underground floor, we'll have you come back. Do not proceed any farther."

We split up into five teams of six, but we nevertheless moved as one huge group into the dungeon. Prince Julius got stuck in the center since we couldn't risk him getting hurt, and my team played vanguard.

Eh, this is fine.

"I'm telling you, learn your place!" Angelica shrieked. Her voice seethed with anger as it echoed through caverns.

Everyone glanced over to see Angelica confronting Marie, apparently fussing over the team breakdown. Our professor was flustered, too young and intimidated by Angelica's ducal lineage to intervene.

Marie, meanwhile, ducked behind the prince's back as if for protection.

Now this one? She is calculating.

"Angelica, enough," Prince Julius said.

Angelica turned to him. "Your Highness, are you truly going to indulge her?"

Marie stayed behind the prince, her eyes cast down at her feet. She pinched the fabric of his sleeve between her fingers, playing up the cute and innocent angle.

“Your Highness, I…” She hesitated. “I just wanted to be with you. You can refuse me if it inconveniences you. I don’t mind.”
“Don’t push your luck!” Angelica snarled. “His status far overshadows yours. I’ve forgiven your behavior until now, but if you’re going to have that attitude…”
Angelica was as quick to anger as she had been in the game. She flew off the handle at the drop of a hat. Well, she *was* the protagonist’s rival, essentially the villainess of the game. The developers probably designed her to be a short-tempered beauty who brandished the power of her family when it suited her.
But something was wrong with this scene…
The woman the prince was supposed to protect was Olivia…but she stood next to me.
“Wh-what’s happening?” Olivia asked, panicked. Okay, she actually *did* look adorable.
More importantly, I could think of only one reason why the game could be going so far off track.
“That girl, Marie. Doesn’t something seem strange about her?” I asked.
Olivia gave the question some thought. “Well, she’s been getting bullied worse than me lately. Everyone’s been whispering about how she’s the daughter of a viscount but dreadfully poor.”
Viscounts were a step above barons, but as with barons, their higher status didn’t necessarily equate to wealth. The size of a lord’s holdings wasn’t always proportionate to the title they held. Many viscounts had formerly held larger territories and greater riches only to have it stolen away by taxation. Nevertheless, they retained their nobility even when they lacked the regional strength necessary to replenish their riches.
Even now, the other nobles with us sympathized with Angelica.
“It’s crazy that she’d cling to the prince like that in front of his fiancée.”
“I’ve seen her getting cozy with other guys, too.”
“Unbelievable.”
I gaped. Holy shit. Marie was trying to supplant the protagonist!
“Enough!” Prince Julius bellowed.
Everyone stopped talking at once.
Angelica was shocked. “Y-Your Highness?”
Jilk, who normally looked gentle and kind, suddenly stepped forward. He placed himself in front of the prince, holding out his right arm as if to block the prince and Marie from Angelica. “Please don’t trouble the prince any further.”
“Trouble him?” Angelica echoed in disbelief. “You’re accusing me of troubling him? I’m doing this *for* him!”
Greg stood nearby with his spear cocked on his shoulder as always. His eyes narrowed in annoyance as he snapped, “That attitude, that’s the problem. Don’t drag your outside relationship with him into the academy. Seeing you flaunt it just pisses me off.”

Ironically, as they were the heirs of powerful nobles, no one else could voice a word of protest.
After a beat of silence, the prince turned to the professor. “I apologize. We’ll be teaming up with Marie. I don’t care how you pair up everyone else.”
Frazzled, the professor just nodded several times as they said, “Y-yes, of course!”
Angelica simply gawked at the exchange, dumbfounded.
I was the only one who thought to glance at Marie. She was smirking.

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The capital’s dungeon was basically an abandoned mine. Wooden pillars and beams supported wide passageways, and here and there, minerals jutted out of the cavern walls. Occasionally, treasure boxes would suddenly appear out of nowhere. The professor had informed us that the cause of their abrupt appearance was still under investigation.
For my part, I knew it was just part of the game and thinking too deeply about it was pointless.
Olivia yanked out a mineral embedded into the wall. It seemed to be iron. Odd how these things popped out of the walls already refined.
“Found one!” Olivia beamed. She brushed sweat from her face, leaving streaks of dirt on her nose and forehead.
“Good job,” I said. “This’ll put us at one hundred dia.”
Dia and dil were the in-game currency. One dia was about the equivalent of one hundred yen in my old world. Other forms of currency existed, too, such as gold and silver, but I hadn’t really seen much of them since this world already used bills and coins.
Olivia scanned the area.
“What’s wrong?” I asked.
“No, it’s just…I wonder why things like this happen in dungeons. It seems a bit strange, doesn’t it? Treasure chests appearing out of nowhere and so on. It’s almost like someone prepared them and left them here.”
Couldn’t say I minded having someone else questioning these ever-flippant game mechanics, but looking for intricate logical explanations wasn’t going to get her anywhere.
“Strange, indeed,” I muttered. “Let’s get going.”
“H-hold on a minute! Aren’t you a little curious, Leon?”
I sighed. “Not really, no.”
She deflated at my lack of interest. “So cold…”
The two of us had wound up taking the lead for our group. Perhaps unsurprising—I was an upstart and she was a scholarship student. We didn’t really jive with the other teams. As a result, we’d grown rather comfortable with each other.

Unfortunately, she was still a commoner, too low to seriously consider marriageable for either of our sakes. And when she eventually became a saint, as she was destined, she would be well beyond my reach. It really was too bad. If she'd been a noble, I'd have gone to great lengths to be able to profess feelings for her. Part of it was her personality, but more practically, she checked off every item on my list for an ideal partner.

Olivia had been raised on an island in the countryside, and she didn't plan to stay in the capital when she graduated, which meant she could make it living out in the middle of nowhere with me.

It really was a shame. If only she weren't a commoner, not to mention the protagonist of the story, I'd have already proposed.

"Quit moping," I told her. "Hurry up and—actually, belay that, you'd best not move." I motioned for her to stay back and slipped my sword from the sheath at my waist. It resembled a katana more than a wide blade. Luxion claimed that since I was Japanese, I should be fine with it. Probably his idea of a challenge: *If you're really Japanese, then let's see you use this!* It wasn't like I had practiced kendo or anything in my previous life, but I accepted it nonetheless.

Behind me, Olivia trembled. "So those are monsters."

Five giant ants blocked the path in front of us. They stood at about seventy to eighty centimeters tall, and as innocuous as regular ants might seem, you'd be in for some trouble if you got snapped up in those huge jaws. Their hives made them the "janitors" of the dungeons; rumor had it that they dragged off any adventurer they defeated.

"This passage is a real pain," I groused. "It's too narrow to use my rifle."

Fortunately, my countryside dad had taught me how to fight country style. No doubt he'd had his fair share of troubles in these caverns as well.

Giant ants were a nuisance, to be sure. Their heads and torsos were fairly sturdy, but their necks were relatively easy to cut through. I darted around the first one's side and slashed my sword through the air. I hacked off the head. Black smoke billowed out of the narrow neck, and the ant's body disappeared. I moved on to the next.

"Two down!" I crowed. "Three to go!"

I dodged their intimidating jaws and whipped nimbly around them to chop through their necks one by one. I used my faux katana to slice through the last one, and the battle was over.

The game had a turn-based system that forced you to wait for your enemies to attack, but here, I could just dash around them and avoid taking damage. Of course, the same stood true for my opponent; if they surrounded me, I'd have trouble handling them. More honestly, I'd end up some monster's lunch.

I rested my weapon on my shoulder, pleased with my work.

Olivia crept up behind me, taking in the dissipating smoke of ex-monsters. "You must be really strong, Leon, to just plow through terrifying enemies like that without even blinking."

I could see how a giant ant would look terrifying to an amateur, but once you knew how to handle them, they were pretty easy to deal with. You could take them down with a single bullet. If you didn't miss, at least.
"I'm sure once you get used to fighting, you won't have any trouble with them either," I said, noticing the anxious expression on her face. I slipped my sword back into its sheath. "We should go."
"It's reassuring to have you with me."
"Eh, this level is no big deal. Only small fry. Oh, but you should be careful of traps. Now, let's march!"
Olivia looked unconvinced. "I don't think that's the issue—"
I yanked my sword from its sheath, shoved her backward, and threw up my left arm to shield us. A monkey-type monster came flying at me, sinking its teeth into my wrist guard.
"Tsk. I let my guard down." I drove my blade through the creature, and it clamped down on my arm until its body disappeared completely. When the black smoke faded, I glanced at my wrist to find that its teeth had pierced my armor. Blood trickled from the wound.
Olivia, who'd fallen onto her butt, jolted upright to inspect my arm anxiously.
"I'm so sorry! This only happened because you were protecting me." Tears formed in her eyes.
I can totally see how a guy would jump in front of a girl like this to cover for her. In the game, I'd thought the protagonist was just deceiving all the guys and using them like meat shields…but this actually wasn't so bad.
"Nah, I let my guard down. It's not your fault. This kind of wound is no big deal, really."
"I-It absolutely is a big deal! I'll get you healed up right away." Olivia slipped off my wrist guard and folded my sleeve back so she could hold her hand over the wound. Her palm emitted a faint white light that felt like a warm caress against my skin.
That's right, I remembered, the protagonist is special because she can use healing magic.
Magic came in various types, but few people could use the healing kind.
Olivia smiled down at my arm. "Good, your wound closed up."
"Uh, yeah. Thanks."
She grinned up at me. "I'm quite good at healing magic. I've been studying on my own ever since a traveling scholar stopped in my town and taught me the basics."
"That's incredible."
Was that part of the game's story? I couldn't remember.
"I'm just glad I was able to be of use to you," she said with true happiness on her face.
She…really is special.

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Julius's crew was guarded by other teams at the front and the back, but the winding passageways connected to the main hall meant that monsters could occasionally attack from the side. Dangerous traps littered the floor as well. The dungeon's tunnels wound deeper and deeper underground, and Julius was starting to realize that letting down your guard anywhere in here, even on the first or second floor, could result in death.

A cold sweat beaded his brow. This was his first dungeon, and he was nervous. Even Jilk, guarding Julius's side, seemed on edge. Brad, who normally always had something sarcastic to say, was mostly silent. Chris's nerves kept his hand glued to the hilt of his sword. Greg was the only one accustomed to dungeoning; given they were on a beginner level, he looked utterly bored.

Julius turned to the girl behind him. "Marie, we're not going too fast for you, are we?"

His words came out a bit awkward, but she smiled at him nonetheless. "I'm doing fine, Your Highness."

She was a breath of fresh air, completely different from the girls Julius had encountered in the palace. He'd heard all about her struggles up until now, and it made him desperate to protect her.

But what really triggered his interest was their first encounter.

Julius had been by himself. His relationship with Angelica had been weighing on his mind, and he'd been in a foul mood. When he got sharp with Marie, a stranger at the time, she slapped him. He was dumbfounded. No other girl had ever shown her temper toward him, not like that—almost like a mother reprimanding a child. The novelty of it left an impression. He'd been obsessed with her ever since.

"If you need anything, just let us know," he said gallantly.

"I will," she promised.

Her smiling face gave him life.

Greg clicked his tongue. "I'm more worried about the prince than I am Marie," he said, in what he probably thought was a quiet tone. "For a noble lady, she's much stronger than she looks. Our palace born-and-bred prince looks pretty feeble in comparison."

Chris glowered at him. "You have some nerve for an uncivilized barbarian from the countryside. I won't let such a slight against the prince slide."

Jilk intervened. "Chris, I know you're being earnest, but right now we're only students. There's no need to get upset."

"How rude of me," Greg said with a chuckle. "I guess the one I should really be worried about is the countryside lord who wastes too much time thinking instead of reacting. My bad."

It was obvious who he was referring to. A vein popped up on Brad's forehead. "Meatheads like you do all their thinking with their muscles. Marie, you'll be in for trouble if you marry a man like him."

She gave an awkward chuckle.

“Hey, don’t lie!” Greg protested. “Marie, any woman who marries me will have an easy life; I’ll make sure of it. You don’t want to get hitched to a sarcastic jerk like Brad. His nitpicking will drive you nuts. If you marry me, you’ll get to do whatever you want. You must be sick of the stifling noble life anyway, right?”

He was rambling, Julius thought with mild annoyance. Clearly desperate to correct any misunderstandings Marie might have about him.

It was obvious that the two teams to the front and back of them could overhear the conversation as well, and they were all visibly uncomfortable. Julius sighed to himself. Worst of all, Angelica was somewhere in their midst.

Suddenly Greg brandished his spear with both hands. “On your guard, everyone! We’ve got company—giant ants.”

Everyone scrambled to whip out weapons. The girls carried handguns for personal protection, but for the most part no one else had permission to carry firearms—too much risk of friendly fire.

“There’s six of them.” Greg swallowed hard. “They’re coming out of the side passage.”

Brad was flustered. “Why didn’t the team scouting ahead take care of them?!”

Chris silently unsheathed his sword, his form elegant as he braced for battle. “If they’re coming from the side passage, the scouting team wouldn’t have noticed them. Still, six is an awful lot. Your Highness, please stay behind us.”

Despite his friend’s words of caution, Julius took one look at Marie and stepped in front of her, sword raised. *I can’t embarrass myself by looking weak in front of her*.

Greg whistled. “You’ve got guts, Your Highness. You’re not part of the royal family for nothing.”

Jilk, on the other hand, appeared slightly exasperated and slipped out his handgun. Due to his skill with firearms, he was the only man who had been granted permission to carry a gun in the close quarters of the dungeon.

Behind them, Angelica barked, “What are you standing around for?! Protect your prince!”

But before the other two teams of six could even move into position around them, Greg bellowed, “Stand back!”

With his hair and his eyes and his spear, he was a crimson blur as he flew toward the monsters. He slammed the blunt end of his spear into one of the giant ants, and its body erupted in a puff of smoke, crushed under the weight of his onslaught. Two others charged at him from either side.

Greg raised his weapon and swung it down, slicing clean through one of the ants. On the other side was Chris, neatly halving another.

“Your movement is inefficient,” Chris remarked.

Yet another ant was swallowed up in flames, and Brad lowered his magical staff. “You really are meatheads. If you hadn’t gotten in my way, I could have taken all three at the same time.”
A couple of gun blasts echoed, and suddenly two ants were sporting holes in their heads. Their bodies dissolved into black vapor.
A thread of white smoke spilled from the barrel of Jilk’s gun. “You need to keep a better eye on your surroundings, my prince.”
The last monster charged at Julius.
“What are you lot doing?!” Angelica shrieked. “Protect His Highness!”
“Just watch for a moment, Miss Angelica,” Jilk said calmly. “The prince can take care of himself.”
Julius met the monster with his double-edged sword held high. “Humph!” His blade whistled through the air and cleaved through the creature’s neck, slamming into the ground. Sharp rocks flew into the air.
The giant ant’s body crumbled into smoke and disappeared.
Julius didn’t even realize he was trembling until he lifted a hand to wipe away the sweat trickling down his cheek. He looked at it—a thin cut striped the back of his hand.
Marie rushed to him and grasped his hand. “Your Highness, are you all right?!”
The warmth from her delicate fingers soothed his nerves. I’m so relieved. Is this what having a crush on someone feels like? No, is this love?
He was drawn from his thoughts when he noticed a faint light emanating from Marie’s hand. When she pulled away, his wound was gone. “Marie, you—!”
She pressed a finger against his lips. “Shh.”
He clamped his mouth shut. She didn’t want the others to know?
“I’m glad you’re all right,” she said. “And I’m relieved everyone else is, too.”
Julius much preferred the way Marie fussed over him after a battle to the way Angelica tried to prevent him from ever fighting at all.
Angelica walked over, shooing Marie away. “Your Highness, I’ve brought you a towel.”
Julius scowled. “I don’t need one. More importantly, we need to keep moving.” He reached for Marie’s hand and started forward.

***

Olivia and I finally arrived at the entrance to the third floor—our final destination for today’s class. Our professor was already there, ensuring no students tried to venture farther. We couldn’t leave until the rest of the teams caught up, and so we were left to stand around and wait.
I took the opportunity to look through the cache of items Olivia and I had collected along the way.

“The capital’s dungeon sure lived up to its reputation.” I grinned. “Those spoiled nobles probably thought we’d be exhausted, being forced to scout ahead, but that just meant we secured a ton of ore for ourselves.”
We had iron, copper, and more, all perfectly refined right out of the cavern walls. It was so convenient I could almost cry.
Olivia held a beautiful crystal in her hand. “This almost looks like a jewel. It’s so pretty. What are these used for?”
“Magic stones? They’re an energy source. When you’re tempering metal, throw one of those in the forge, and the metal will come out better quality. I don’t know a whole lot about them, but they’re pretty incredible. The only thing I care about is getting a good price for them. Maybe about two hundred dia for that one…?”
If we sold the whole lot, we could make that five hundred. This haul was inarguably ours, since we were the ones who scouted ahead. Not that those rich brats would even give our winnings a second glance.
“With this much, we can split it and I’ll still have enough for one more tea part—nope, no I won’t.” I re-estimated. “Dammit. I need to make more money.”
I had the tea set I’d bought last time, but I would need new leaves and hors d’oeuvres. A couple hundred dia wouldn’t last me very long. My shoulders sank in defeat.
Olivia didn’t seem to notice. “How does the cave produce these magic stones? I can understand metal, but no mine I know of has minerals like these. And I heard they *only* appear in dungeons. Something about that just seems odd.”
Distracted, I answered without thinking. “Eh, you know how it is. When you kill monsters, their mana gets released into the soil. Builds up. Eventually, it coalesces into magic stones.”
“Really?” she said, surprised. “I’ve never heard that before. That’s not in our textbooks.”
“I think I remember reading it somewhere,” I said absentmindedly. “Wait. Would that mean the treasure boxes operate on the same principle? Huh. Magic and mana are pretty cool.”
For my next tea party, should I try to match everything to the preferences of the girl I invite? But that could mean buying a whole new tea set. Of course, there’s no point in having a quality set if the tea itself isn’t up to par. Ugh! Why is tea so difficult?! I can kind of see why the Japanese commanders in the Warring States Period collected sets. The tea parties in this world do kind of resemble the tea ceremony in a way…
I noticed Olivia peering at me. “What?”
“You’re quite knowledgeable,” she said. “I’m surprised.”
Knowledgeable? That wasn’t right. This was my second life and I’d still only managed to land in the middle of the pack with my entrance test scores at the academy. Far more exceptional students littered the school.

But I liked getting the compliment; I was pretty simpleminded like that. Not always a bad thing. “You think so? Well, if you want, I can help you learn anything you want to know.”
A smile stretched across her face. “Yes, I’d like that!”
It couldn’t hurt to help her a little with her studies on the side while I continued searching for a marriage partner actually within my reach.

Chapter 6:
The True Protagonist

I KIND OF WANTED to punch past-Leon.

I'd talked all big, saying I'd help Olivia with her studies, but I hadn't even checked her level first. Not that I could really be blamed for that—she was the one who claimed she could barely keep up!

And yet here we were…

"I don't know what this part means," she said. "Evidently, depending on the way you arrange the incantation, you can adapt the magic to…"

It was just the two of us studying in the library. Studying alone with a girl was supposed to be a bittersweet adolescent experience, one I'd naively anticipated. Now I had cold sweat pouring down my back.

Simply put, Olivia was smart.

"Uh, yeah. Basically that means…" I managed to combine knowledge from my previous life with what I'd gleaned from studying and wiggled my way through some kind of explanation.

Miraculously, she seemed impressed with my vague response. "Yes, I think you're right!" She nodded. "So the textbook isn't always accurate after all. I thought something was off about it because the official theories didn't match my own intuitions. I'm glad I asked you about this."

Crap. Now she was starting to point out errors in the textbook.

"W-well," I stammered, "it's not *all* wrong. I still think it's important to read the fundamental texts."

"You're right, of course. About twenty percent of this book is incorrect, but that means eighty percent is still helpful."

You could tell her book had seen a lot of use. Had she already finished reading through the whole thing? In just this one short term? There were still six months to go before the year was over! Even some of the nobles found our books so difficult they'd thrown them out altogether.

I kept up with my studies enough to pass the tests, but I couldn't say I completely understood everything. I got thoroughly average scores in my magic classes.

I spent our study session praying for the clock to hurry along and end my misery. When our time was finally up, I said, "W-well, I guess we should end here today, since it's already so late."

"Oh, you're right. It went by so fast." Olivia smiled as if genuinely happy. Fast? Each minute felt like an hour…

"Um, would you mind if we did this again next weekend?"

The way she peered up at me with those puppy dog eyes made me want to instantly answer, *Sure, of course we can!* But I wasn't exactly eager to live through this all over again.

As I tried to think up some excuse to avoid a second round of agony, I suddenly remembered the most important objective I had at the academy: getting married! Crap, that was right! I was here to find a partner! What a twisted world this was that I could honestly say I wasn't in school to learn.

"Sorry," I managed, "but I have to spend my next weekend getting ready for another tea party."

"Oh, no, um, I was the one asking you for a favor!" Olivia said, flustered. "You don't have to apologize. I wasn't thinking. Of course you'd be busy."

Right. I *was* busy.

Seeing the dejected look on her face as she gathered up her notes and textbook made me feel a bit guilty. But I couldn't forget my mission. I needed to find a wife with whom I could have a businesslike relationship. Though, I was at the very bottom of the caste system here. Those at the top were already fighting for the girls with good personalities. Even if one was still available, she would be worrying about her own home and future; she'd definitely be looking for someone of higher status than me.

Ahh, this world truly was a cruel one.

Wait. Wasn't Japan kind of the same way?

"Anyway, thank you for your help today, Leon." When Olivia smiled at me, her whole face seeming to shine. It was too bright for a rotten worm like me who'd lied his way out of another study session.

How embarrassing. If I took into account my life in Japan, I'd lived much longer than her, yet here I was, lying to save what little pride I still possessed.

Where was the closest hole I could crawl into?

***

Daniel, Raymond, and I were hanging out in my dorm room, sipping drinks and snacking. These weren't at all the same kind of treats we prepared for the tea parties; they were high in fat and mostly fried. We even had soda, which, come to think of it, made this world feel pretty modern, actually. That went for the school uniforms, too. Probably because this was an otome game?

"Did you guys hear?" Daniel said, munching on fries. "Two of the rich first-years already got engaged. The girls are some of the nice ones, too—Milly and Jessica. Wish one of the lucky guys could've been me."

Raymond clearly tried to keep a calm face even as Daniel sulked, but he still had a gloomy air. He actually looked like he might burst into tears at any moment. I couldn't blame him; he had feelings for Milly.

"It's only natural they'd go for guys with higher status than us. We never stood a chance." Raymond paused. "Yeah, as long as Milly's happy, that's all that matters."

I'd asked the two of them to come over knowing they were feeling blue. The wealthier men had a lot more to offer the women and had been very proactive. There hadn't been much of an opening to mount a counter-attempt. Milly and Jessica were ideal partners, the top of their class, after all. Men were starting to quarrel over women of lesser quality.

Also, things just weren't so bad for boys from families of earl rank or higher. Most of them already had partners picked out for them, as was the case with Prince Julius and Angelica.

Daniel downed his soda all at once. "There's no hope left for me this year. The only girls left are witches!"

There *were* a lot of girls who looked down on men.

Raymond nodded. "We just had bad luck. I mean, we have Prince Julius and the rest of the elites in our year. Compared to them, we're nothing."

With handsome looks, social status, and tons of money, they were in a different league. We couldn't even begin to measure up. What's more, with their arranged marriages they no *need* to compete. No wonder they got to relax.

"Hey, Leon." Daniel turned his concern on me. "Are things going well for you? You've been with that scholarship student this whole time, right? Have you given up on marriage?"

I sipped on my juice. "I haven't given up. I've been sending out invitations, but all the girls are turning me down."

"You'll dig your own grave by being too sympathetic," Raymond lectured. He pretended to be tough, but I knew he was worried about me. "You've been too fixated on the scholarship girl. That's why the others won't come near you. You should put some distance between you."

Lucle had said the same thing. He'd even warned me that some upperclassmen had been forced to accept marriages with unfavorable conditions simply to avoid graduating without a partner—conditions like allowing their wives to have other lovers, even besides a demi-human

servant. How demeaning. Essentially, *I'll give you an heir, but you have to financially support me and all my lovers*.
Even worse, some women made these contracts with multiple men in succession and siphoned off as much money as they could while they lived the high life with their lovers. From their point of view, they were leaving heirs in their wake, so it was a fair trade.
Japan seemed like paradise in comparison.
"Leon," Daniel said suddenly, "your older brother is in the general class, right?"
"Yeah." I still wanted to drag Nicks along with me to the higher class, but I hadn't found my fortune until after he was enrolled. A shame. I'd have liked for us to share this misery together.
"The girls in the general class aren't bad," Daniel went on, "but for some reason the girls in the higher class…"
It was true, the girls in the general class were mostly quite normal. They were still hard to appease when it came to marriage, or so I'd heard, but they were preferable to the girls we had to please. At the very least, they didn't have slaves to wait on them.
In fact, only a certain window of women had slaves. It was frowned upon in earldom families and above, and commoners couldn't afford them.
And here I was, stuck in that super-fun middle…
"You know," I said, "when I heard my brother talk about all of this, I wanted to punch him in the face. I want to be in the general class, too," I complained. "Then I wouldn't have to suffer."
Tears welled up in Raymond's eyes. "Yeah! Why does getting married have to be so hard?"
I wondered what he and Daniel would think if I said, *Because we're in an otome game.*
"By the way," Raymond said, wiping his eyes, "have you guys heard all the fuss about Prince Julius lately?" He was probably trying to distract us from our woes.
"What about him?"
I continued nursing my drink as I listened. The prince and his cronies were far removed from the rest of us. I was curious enough to listen, but it was rather irrelevant to my life, outside of whatever Olivia got up to. Meanwhile, there always seemed to be drama going on with the prince. Had Marie triggered one of his special events from the game or something?
"Oh, I know what you're talking about," Daniel joined in. "Marie, wasn't it? The other girls have been getting real nasty with her."
Of course they were. It was only natural, when Marie kept cozying up to His Highness.
"They're saying the bullies' ringleader is the prince's fiancée—that duke's daughter. But he yelled at her and made her quit," Raymond said. "The stories I've heard seem pretty credible. It might be legit."
I choked on my drink.

“H-hey, are you okay?” Raymond reared back in surprise.
“Do you know something about this, Leon?” Daniel asked eagerly.
I shook my head, “Nah, it just went down the wrong pipe.” I wiped my mouth with a cloth, then dabbed at the cold sweat on my brow.
The event where the prince lashed out in anger at his fiancée was supposed to take place much later in the game. To make matters worse, while Olivia and I were close, I saw no signs of her bonding with any of the love interests.
What in the world was going on?

***

I hadn’t intended to get involved in the events of the game. As a background character, I wanted to watch from afar, if I paid attention at all. Whatever happened should have nothing to do with me, but the future didn’t look so promising. Who knew where we’d end up if I let things keep brewing like this? I had to look into the matter myself.
The only girl I was close with in the higher classes was Olivia, so I brought up the topic with her when we were sitting in the library.
“Sorry, I don’t know very much either,” she said. “For a while, the girls were really cold toward Marie. But things seemed to have settled down now.”
“Can I ask one more thing? Have you had any interactions with her?”
From my perspective, it seemed like Marie had somehow stolen the protagonist’s place in the game, but perhaps this world didn’t have any relation to the otome game after all. Maybe I had the wrong idea. That didn’t seem likely, but…
“Oh, we’ve met several times. The first was a few days after the entrance ceremony. I came to the library, and she approached me.” Olivia’s eyes turned somber, and her gaze fell to her lap.
Clearly she wasn’t too keen on discussing the encounter, but I had to know. I needed more info if I was going to fix this.
Suddenly, she asked, blushing, “Are girls like her…your type?”
I couldn’t help the look of utter disgust. Olivia blinked in surprise. “Did I guess wrong?”
“I *hate* her,” I said fiercely.
“O-oh, I didn’t realize.” She fell silent for a moment. “I went to the library just to get a peek at it, but Marie told me to get out. She said I was a nuisance. It happened more than once.” She forced a smile. “She came up to me in the courtyard, too, and just like before, she treated me like a pest. I asked her what I’d done to upset her. She just said, ‘I hate girls like you.’”
Marie hated Olivia? Certainly a number of noble ladies disliked having a commoner attend the academy, but it sounded like something else was going on.

I fell silent, and Olivia looked troubled. Before either of us could speak again, a voice suddenly rang out.
“We’re going to do it here?”
“Why not? It’s just you and me.”
Oh? Some couple was having a romantic rendezvous in the library? *Who’s the lucky bastard?*
I crouched down and sneaked over toward where the voices had come from.
“Leon!” Olivia scolded me in a whisper. “What do you think you’re doing?!”
I kept my voice low. “I gotta know. It’s important for us guys to keep track of who’s hooking up with who, after all.”
Together, we peeked behind the shelves. I had to slap a hand over Olivia’s mouth to keep her from giving away our position when she gasped in surprise.
A man with purple hair had his arms wrapped tight around the waist of a petite, blonde girl.
That’s right. Brad Fou Field is one of those types that’s always in here.
Miss Olivia’s eyes were also fixated on the two.
And it wasn’t just anyone Brad was kissing—it was Marie.
Slowly, Olivia and I crawled back from the shelves and fled.

***

Marie Fou Lafan was on her way back to her dormitory, having just left the library. She pressed her fingers to her lips as she recalled her romantic encounter with Brad.
“Ha. This world really is incredible. Not as many idiotic men here as there were in my previous world, *and* women get to rule over them. It’s perfect.”
The evening sky was bathed in orange as the sun began to set. Marie suppressed the urge to skip as she walked along.
“Those stupid girls have stopped bullying me since Julius and the others scolded them. I can finally enjoy my second chance at school life. Things are so *perfect*.”
The role of an otome game protagonist was truly the ideal life. She had replaced the protagonist, and now the whole world revolved around *her*.
Turning a corner down a school corridor, she spotted Julius and Jilk.
“There you are, Marie!” Had they been looking for her?
The two ambled over.
Those two are always together, she noted. Wait, are they…? I mean, I’ve heard homosexual relationships were pretty normal, historically. It’s not unthinkable.
Marie smiled at them as she entertained herself with lurid thoughts. She adjusted her posture; it was easy to pretend to be the sort of girl they wanted. Julius was especially simple.
“What is it, Your Highness?” she asked.

He looked exasperated. “Stop calling me that. Just Julius is fine. Anyway, Jilk and I were talking… You don’t have your own servant, do you?”
Marie shook her head and put on a show of being embarrassed. “I-I’m afraid not. My house is a bit… Well, our finances are too tight, so I wasn’t able to afford one.”
I wish I could have at least been reborn into a house with some money—or to parents who knew how to not blow their fortune on pointless crap. She masked her dissatisfaction, playing up the angle of a noble but self-sacrificing heroine.
“In that case,” Jilk said, “allow the prince and me to foot the bill so you can buy yourself one. You must feel lonely here at the academy without a servant of your own.”
Inwardly, she pumped her fist in victory. Nice! Now I’ll have a lover, and I won’t have to worry about getting pregnant! There’s so few girls here who don’t have slaves. It’s been really humiliating not owning one myself. Weird that women can just strut around in the open with their lovers… Not that I care! I’m delighted.
It did strike her as odd that two of her love interests were gifting her a lover, but she didn’t dwell too much on it; that was just how this world worked.
She put on a display of gratitude. “Th-thank you, Your Hi—I mean, Julius and Jilk.”
The prince blushed when she said his name. More than ever, Marie felt confident she had nothing to be nervous about.
Jilk turned to walk on. “In that case, I’ll prepare a carriage and we can go now. We’ll head to the best slave market in the capital.”

***

Only nobles of earl rank and higher could use the more luxurious rooms in the girls’ dormitory. Even more ostentatious suites were prepared for girls descended from royalty.
Angelica was staying in one such room, and one of her followers had just marched inside.
“Lady Angelica, that girl! She’s having the prince buy her a demi-human slave right as we speak.”
Angelica stood by the window, her back facing the other girl. “Leave her. If she understood the meaning of that slave, she would realize the true nature of their relationship.”
“But still…!”
Angelica was the daughter of a duke. If money were the only issue, she could have easily bought dozens of slaves if she wanted. But a duke’s daughter never would, and more importantly, she was engaged to the prince. As the future queen, it would only sully her name to keep a lover.
She dismissed her follower from the room.

As soon as the girl was gone, Angelica reached for a decoration on a nearby table and threw it to the floor with all the strength she could muster.
“Why is he so…*obsessed* with a worthless girl like her?! Everything I’ve done…everything… All for the sake of the prince…!”
Not long ago, Julius and the other high lords had interrogated the girls bullying Marie. Angelica had never ordered them to do any such thing, and the bullies hadn’t actually been her followers, but they were all in the same larger clique. The girls had gotten carried away, using Marie as a punching bag to vent their frustrations. When Julius and the others hounded them about it, the terrified girls laid the blame on Angelica.
It left her in a troublesome position. She understood the pressures of society left many women in her class emotionally volatile, and that they had been unable to withstand the negative attention from Julius and his friends, shifting the blame the second it occurred to them to do so. Yet now, she was force to take it.
Angelica had tried to explain to Julius that she wasn’t involved. But neither he nor his friends would believe her, and her position within the school had suffered for it. Even now, the number of girls *and* boys trying to curry favor with Marie was steadily increasing—mostly wealthy second and third sons who wouldn’t inherit their family’s territory and girls who weren’t fond of Angelica to begin with.
That didn’t matter to Angelica. She didn’t have the time for peons. What frustrated her was how readily Julius and his friends had bought the lies. It was utterly vexing.
“They think *I* ordered this? There’s no proof anywhere, but they’re so eager to believe everything that girl says…”
Even worse, the real culprits had now allied themselves with a group spreading terrible rumors about Angelica—a group that was gradually gaining influence. Angelica had nevertheless held strong…until Julius said something that crushed her:
We may be engaged, but at the academy, we’re nothing more than fellow students. Don’t interfere with my life.
Tears welled up in her eyes as she sank down to the floor.
“I-I was raised for this…I was raised to be with the prince! He’s the only reason I’m here!”
Angelica loved Julius, but he didn’t feel the same. To him, their future marriage was nothing more than a political arrangement. Ever since their engagement was made official, Angelica had poured everything into training to be a good partner for him. She’d worked so hard for his sake, but never once had he rewarded her efforts.
The only thing Julius wanted was Marie.
“Your Highness…if you’d only tell me what you want, I could… Why her?!”
Angelica clapped her hands over her face, and the tears burst forth. She curled into a ball as she sobbed.

***

“Hey, louse!”
It was the morning of one of our precious days off, and some fiend (a.k.a. my sister Jenna) came charging into the boys’ dormitory with her prized slave in tow.
I yawned, glancing at the clock. Realizing it was still only seven in the morning, I flopped back into bed.
“Don’t sleep!” she screeched. “What the heck is going on?! Explain it to me right now!”
I had no idea why she was foaming at the mouth, and I was way more interested in catching a few more minutes of sleep than bothering to find out. “Sorry, the boys had martial arts training yesterday. I’m exhausted.”
The girls got to enjoy leisure sports while the boys went on long runs and drilled in the mud. Dying in battle with humans and monsters wasn’t altogether rare in this world, so training was pretty intense.
“Enough lazing about! Tell me everything you know about the situation with the first-year students. Right this minute!” She clapped her hands in my face.
Her cat-eared servant lifted me out of bed and plopped me into a chair.
I sat there, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, yawning. “You want info about the first-years? I’m sure you know more than I do.”
“There are weird rumors, everywhere. And for all intents and purposes, you *are* a student of the higher class.”
“For all intents and purposes,” what the hell? Rude.
“Uh, okay, well,” I tried, “I’ve heard that two of the most desirable girls, Milly and Jessica, already found partners. Pretty disappointing for the rest of us. They were both good catches.”
“Who cares about that?” she scoffed.
Who cares? Just every male student at the academy, that’s who!
“You know that Marie girl, right?” Jenna continued.
I flinched at the mention, remembering the sight of Marie swapping spit with Brad in the library. “She’s, uh…really close with Prince Julius’s group.”
“*Just* the prince?”
“Oh, she’s close with the other high lords, too. *Real* close.”
Being all over each other on school grounds was bound to stir rumors, whether Marie and Brad had intended for that to happen or not. And in Marie’s case, she was already a hot topic.
“There’s a duke’s daughter in your grade, too, right?” Jenna asked. “Spill. What do you know about her?”
“You think I know anything? The only thing I’ve heard is she really ticked off the crown prince.”
Jenna fell into silent contemplation.

It was my turn to ask the questions. “Do you know any specifics? People say the duke’s daughter was the one who put out the order for girls to bully Marie.”
“Are you an imbecile?” she sneered.
Me?! She was the one who’d barged into the boys’ dormitory first thing in the morning! So she was the one who could stand to learn a few things…like discretion! Although, considering she had a lover waiting on her every need wherever she went, she’d pretty much already thrown discretion to the wind.
“At her level, she doesn’t need to put out an order. The girls will act on their own against anyone she doesn’t like.” Jenna shook her head. “If she were serious about squashing Marie, the girl would already be dead. Duke families have unfathomable power. Honestly, this is why men are so worthless.”
“So the duke’s daughter had nothing to do with the bullying?”
“I didn’t say that. It was still the girls in her group that were doing it, so she has to take responsibility for their actions.”
“Doesn’t sound reasonable to me.”
She shrugged. “That’s just how things work.”
Apparently women also had it hard in this otome game world. Or at least, the villainess had it hard. But in the game, the duke’s daughter *had* been the one ordering the other girls to bully the protagonist…although maybe I was remembering wrong? It’d been ten years since I’d played.
Jenna glanced at me and turned solemn. “The second- and third-years are in a state of panic. I really wish that girl wouldn’t stir up so much trouble around the crown prince. I had my own plans and now they’re a mess. You should put more serious effort into gathering information, you know! Report to me properly from now on.”
What the hell do you think I am? I’m not your gofer. Though I was still going to look into this. It felt like a problem.
“Do you fully comprehend what this means?” she asked.
“You girls are having a rough time.”
“Moron! Imbecile! Worthless!”
I clapped my hands over my ears. It was far too early for her shrieking.
Exasperated, she explained, “Assuming nothing unforeseen happens, the crown prince will succeed the throne! You’re in his grade! If you keep on his good side, you’ll have a promising future. Got it? On the other hand, if you do anything to upset him, it’s all over for you.”
I was just a lowly baron from the border region. The prince had nothing to do with me. I mean, I guess it mattered to Jenna because she wanted to live in the capital. If she was related to some guy the prince disliked, her outlook for climbing the social ladder would be pretty dim.
“As long as I can find a partner and graduate without any trouble, I don’t care about the prince,” I said.
“Ugh, you men are impossible!”

While I had considered the possibility of trying to curry favor with the prince and his friends for my own benefit, that would just mean I'd get wrapped up in whatever plot-related trouble brewed in the future. I didn't want that. Things in the kingdom were going to go to hell in the future anyway, assuming the events followed the game's story.
"Anyway," she huffed, "you're not involved, right? That means there's nothing for me to worry about."
"They don't care about a countryside baron like me," I assured her. Though I *was* still concerned about what Marie thought she was doing.
"There are separate parties for all the grades at the end of the first term. Don't blow it and embarrass me," Jenna warned. "Hmph, all this upheaval… Now I have to pick a different guy as my partner *again*." She started toward the door, preoccupied with her own problems. "Oh, one other thing. Have you found a partner yet?"
That big smirk on her face irked me. Despite her awful personality, Jenna had an endless line of men approaching her for marriage. I was envious of her ability to pick and choose.
"If I had, I wouldn't be struggling like this," I grumbled.
"I figured as much. You may stand out, but you don't have any charm. Maybe it's time for you to make some self-improvements."
I snorted. "Well, this charmless louse is the one who improved our family's fortune enough for you to buy that slave of yours. How's that make you feel? Go on, tell me, dear sister."
"Go fall out of a window!" she shrieked, then stomped out of the room, her slave following behind her.
I got up from the chair and stretched.
Luxion, who'd pretended to be an inanimate fixture in the room, floated up to me. "Quite the lively morning."
"Already time for the first term to end," I mumbled. "I guess it makes sense, having a party. We are nobles, after all."
This otome game world had events for first-years similar to school events in Japan. Well, the game was made for a Japanese audience, after all.
"All I did this term was venture into a dungeon with my friends and have tea parties," I moaned.
"It's true you haven't really accomplished anything. You are a bit of a sloth, Master," Luxion said.
"Do you have some kind of grudge against me, Luxion?"
"I hate all new humans. By virtue of that, I hate you as well."
"You poor thing, getting used and abused by someone you loathe," I mocked him. "Don't worry, I'll be working you hard for the rest of my life."
"I look forward to it," he replied coolly.
Despite Luxion's opinion, my life at the academy so far had actually been quite hectic. In addition to attending classes every day, I'd also been dungeoning to earn extra cash. Not that it had done me much good. All that

money had gone to inviting girls to tea parties, only for them to end in failure one by one. In that way, the term had passed in the blink of an eye.
“Hey,” I said suddenly, “can you gather some information for me?”
For as mouthy as he was, Luxion was still a devoted robot. “You want me to look into the duke’s daughter and Marie Fou Lafan, yes? I can, but only for relevant data. I won’t share their bust, waist, and hip sizes with you, for example.”
After a pause, I mumbled, “You’d better share.”
“It’s unnecessary information. I must decline.”
“Oh well.” I shrugged. “Can you look into what Jenna was talking about?”
“You want to understand the relationships between the prince, the duke’s daughter, and Marie? How is that relevant to you?” He sounded skeptical. “You’ve always said you weren’t going to get involved. Are you changing your mind?”
“I’m just curious.”
“A nosy onlooker? You truly are beyond all hope. Very well, I will look into the situation.”
Luxion’s body melted into the background like a chameleon, finally disappearing from view as he slipped out of the room to fulfill his mission.
That robot really can do everything.

Chapter 7:
White Glove

ONLY A LITTLE BIT of the term was left, and the parties for each grade were in full swing. Even at the party for the first-years, words fell short of the luxurious dishes that lined the tables of the school's most extravagant venue.

Raymond, Daniel, and I mingled mostly with boys who shared our background. If you counted the first-years from the general class who were with us, we were an impressive crowd, all told. The guys were decked out in our school uniforms, but most of the girls arrived in sexy dresses with their demi-human servants at their heels. The other boys and I exerted real effort to peel our eyes off the girls' chests.

"I think that girl just now was an F-cup…" I murmured and cleared my throat. "Ahem, I mean, the food here's great, right?" I turned back to the table where Daniel was chowing down on a heaping plate of meat.

"This is my first time being at a party this huge," he said between mouthfuls. "The academy is incredible!"

"Daniel, don't speak with your mouth full." Raymond watched our friend with exasperation. "Hard to believe they're throwing parties this enormous for each grade. The capital's on a completely different level. We countryside heirs can't hold a candle to this."

No kidding—and that was kind of the point. According to Luxion, part of the reason for these parties was to show off the opulence and power of the capital to the poorer nobles. But even the rich, pampered noble kids had to be impressed with this level of extravagance.

Daniel surveyed the other attendees. "Even most of the girls from the general class are wearing dresses. Almost none of them are wearing their school uniforms."

Raymond pushed up his glasses. His eyes were fixed on a thin girl that was just his type. The guy was a total closet pervert.

"The price range for dresses is rather broad," he said. "Apparently you can get one for two thousand dia."

Two hundred thousand yen for *one* dress?! Was that supposed to be cheap?

Just then, Marie, the heart of every recent rumor, made her appearance…in her school uniform. Whispers erupted at the sight of her. Thanks to Marie, no one else cared that the scholarship student, Olivia, was also here in her uniform.

Odd. A viscount's daughter should be able to afford a dress, I thought. I watched her stride over to the prince and the other high lords. These kings of the school caste system welcomed her warmly, though Prince Julius looked stunned when he saw her outfit.

"You're not wearing a dress?" he asked.

“Uh, um…I wasn’t able to afford one.” Marie fidgeted, no doubt in a bid to entice them.
All of the boys joined in a chorus to say, “If you’d told us sooner…”
Jilk smiled. “The uniform does feel a bit refreshing after this parade of dresses, but if you’d like, why don’t I arrange a dress for you for the next party? I’m a regular at one of the stores in the capital, and I’m sure they’d find something perfect for you.”
“N-no, I couldn’t possibly,” Marie insisted with a shake of her head.
Her humble display only fueled the boys’ excitement as they each insisted on helping, almost like the five were competing for her affection.
Not that any of them mattered to me. Background characters had one mission here and one mission only: finding a partner. This party was the perfect chance. According to the upperclassmen, couples sometimes formed at these events.
“All right, you two, are you ready?” I asked, glancing over at my friends.
Daniel set his plate down. “Oh, I’m stuffed.”
Raymond readjusted his glasses. “We have our work cut out for us.”
“Oh! There’s a group of three girls right over there! Let’s move in.”
As one, we launched into action. Our objective? Approach whatever girls we could. The atmosphere at the party had put them all in good spirits. Perhaps some of them would lower their standards enough to agree to marry one of us. At this point, it didn’t even matter if a girl already had a lover.
“Excuse me? Go look in a mirror.”
“You’re from a baron house in where now? Not interested.”
“Hicks like you should look for hick girls. I wouldn’t even consider someone less than viscount rank. And you’re from a border region? Don’t kid yourself.”
“Guys this desperate are so slimy. Do you even realize how shallow you look?”
“I like a more laidback guy, thanks.”
“You don’t stand a chance of measuring up to the prince and his inner circle.”
Even their demi-human servant-lovers sneered at us. They knew we couldn’t touch them, after all; if a human male laid a hand on a woman’s slave, he faced a strict investigation.
“Um, uh, but if you could just talk to us—”
One of the girls jerked her chin at her servant. The beefcake demi-human sent us flying. We tumbled across the floor, and girls laughed. Boys either joined in or sent us sympathetic looks.
“Leave,” huffed the girl who owned the demi-human as her friends snickered. “And try to be a little more presentable at the next party. Or perhaps it’s already too late for you. Maybe your only salvation is to pray you’ll be better in your next life. Farewell, country scum.”

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“Damn those girls, acting so high and mighty!” Daniel bellowed as we moped outside the venue.
Raymond sank down on a bench, squeezing his knees to his chest as he gazed vacantly up at the night sky. “She basically told us to die and start all over again… Do we really deserve to be told that?”
Yeah, and thing was, I was already living my second life. Didn’t love hearing that I might need another.
Cheerful music and laughter spilled out of the party hall. The three of us had fled the humiliating scene as the higher class girls and their servants cackled. The girls from the general class had either glanced at us with pity or avoided meeting our eyes altogether.
How pathetic…
“I’m fed up,” I blurted. “With all of it.”
Daniel started to say something but thought better of it, closed his mouth, and looked away. Raymond was silent, too. As barony heirs, we *had* to marry one of those noble ladies. We belonged to a house, and therefore we needed a partner of high standing. If we didn’t, the other nobles would treat us like pariahs. *There’s just something not right with them,* they would say. My dad married Zola because the risks of doing otherwise outweighed the misery. If you failed to conduct yourself with the proper decorum, other nobles called your house uncivilized and barbaric. If society cast you out, surrounding regions found reasons to justify launching war against you. All of these dangers fanned the desperation that led to the situation here at the academy.
Daniel and I joined Raymond on the bench and stared up at the sky.
“I’m kind of disgusted with women at this point,” Daniel confessed.
“I understand completely,” Raymond agreed. “If we fail to get married before we leave, we’ll be the dregs of society. Women just don’t face the same pressure.”
It wasn’t as if all the girls at the academy were terrible, but proportionally, too many *were*. No wonder so many men began to resent their lives here.
“When I heard some guys get so fed up with women they turn to men instead, I laughed it off,” I said, remembering something Lucle told me. “That was at the beginning of the term. It’s not so funny anymore.”
Daniel and Raymond nodded. The worst part about that was some of the women here enjoyed objectifying male-on-male romance. This world really was beyond saving.
Guy enrolls → Girls are awful to him so he starts to hate them → He turns to men for basic human companionship → The fujoshi rejoice.
Rinse and repeat in a vicious cycle created by women. You might even call girls like that…*cyclepaths*. Get it? Because they’re crazy and… No? Okay, well, I thought it was funny.
Soon, the music inside the hall stopped. I checked my pocket watch, but it wasn’t yet time for the party to end. Maybe the band was taking a break—

but the laughter had faded, too. If I listened closely, I could hear someone… shouting?
“Hey, is it me or is something weird is going on in there?” I asked.
Raymond glanced over at the hall. “Now that you mention it, sounds like a ruckus.”
“Want to go check it out?” Daniel stood up. “We don’t even have to go inside. We can peek in from the windows.”
Raymond hesitated. “Let’s not embarrass ourselves any more than we already have. If they see us, we’ll be a laughingstock. Although, I would like to see what’s going on…”
As we discussed how best to satisfy our curiosity, a girl darted out of the building. She glanced around, then spotted us and hurried over. I noted she was wearing a school uniform, but I didn’t realize it was Olivia until she got closer.
“Leon! It’s bad!”

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We returned to the party hall to find the atmosphere thick with a strange tension. The nobles retreated to the edges of the room, making way for the fuss unfolding in the middle of the floor.
“What in the world is going on?” I asked Olivia.
“At first it was just a light argument, but…”
Marie cowered in the center of everything, surrounded by the five love interests. A new blond-haired, blue-eyed elf servant was also by her side. Well, well. So game-mechanic Kyle finally showed up.
Angelica stood in front of all of them, her voice trembling with anguish. “Why won’t you listen to me?! I… Everything I’ve done has been for the prince!”
The prince stared back at her coldly. “I can’t bear to listen to your excuses. It’s that simple.”
“Wait! You know exactly what kind of person that girl is. Why are you so accepting of her?!”
Olivia whispered to me. “Um, Miss Angelica saw Marie holding hands with a boy who wasn’t the prince, and she got angry. Then the prince told her it wasn’t worth getting upset over.”
So he had no problem with Marie getting handsy with other men? What an open-minded prince. I’d never be comfortable with that.
Marie, still in her school uniform, hid behind the prince’s back. She played the defenseless victim well; no doubt, it made the men surrounding her want to protect her. Angelica, on the other hand, shone brilliantly in her gorgeous red dress and flawless makeup.
The two stood in stark contrast. While Marie had five high-born men and a handsome slave standing in her corner, Angelica had no one.

Brad stepped forward. “It’s pathetic seeing the daughter of Redgrave House reduced to this. Look around you. Not a single person here approves of your behavior.”
Angelica scanned the hall. Her followers, who had happily reaped the benefits of aligning with her up until this point, wouldn’t look her way. But while her former entourage eschewed open hostility, other students, who disliked Angelica, grinned triumphantly.
“Do you even know what that woman has done?” Angelica asked angrily. “It’s not just one of you. She’s—”
“We already know,” said Chris Fia Arclight, the boy with light-blue hair.
Angelica gaped. “What?!”
Marie trembled as if in fear when Chris glanced back and smiled at her. Normally pleased to be the solemn, sword-wielding type, he rarely showed such emotion. The ladies standing on the sidelines blushed.
It’s his looks, isn’t it? It’s gotta be his looks. Yep, it’s definitely his looks.
“Marie saved me,” Chris said. “She listened to all my worries. And now, I want to protect her.”
It took some crazy self-confidence to blurt out that confession in front of half the student body. I had to respect him for that.
“Stop beating around the bush,” Greg chided. “Be frank and say you like her.”
Jilk put a hand over his mouth to hide a grin. “You have a point. Marie is an incredible woman. Though, I think *I* am the one who loves her the most.”
Speechless, Angelica stared at His Highness.
Prince Julius had a sullen look. “No matter how close we are, Jilk, that’s uncalled for. I’m the one who loves Marie the most.”
The girls in the crowd squealed in unison, shrieks ringing off the walls.
“Did you hear that?!”
“I want one of them to say that to me!”
“I’m so jealous! I probably don’t feel as bad as the duke’s daughter looks, though.”
They snickered.
Angelica’s eyes fell to the floor as she fisted her hands. “Am I to understand you won’t be ending this little farce once we graduate, then?”
The prince looked away. “There’s no one else like her in the world. I didn’t hate you before we enrolled, Angelica, but I won’t go easy on you if you try to hurt Marie.”
Scornful feminine laughter echoed in every corner of the hall.
“Did you hear that? It’s all over for you now, Miss High-and-Mighty.”
“That means their engagement is basically over, right?”
“I always hated her, to be honest.”
“Is this how a girl feels when she sees a harem?” I wondered aloud. “I think I’m in physical pain.”
“Is something wrong, Leon?” Olivia asked, cocking her head to the side.
Daniel and Raymond stared at the fallen duke’s daughter in shock.

“Uh, is anyone else getting a bad feeling about this?” Daniel asked.
“Yeah…” Raymond agreed. “She looks like she’s about to commit murder.”
I thought Angelica mostly looked resigned, as if she’d completely given up. The light that had once burned brightly in her eyes had extinguished and darkness crept in to take its place.
But suddenly, she flung out her hand, tossing something at Marie.
“Huh?” Marie stared, dumbfounded, as the object softly smacked against her, then plopped to the ground.
A white glove.
“Pick it up, harlot,” Angelica challenged. “You filthy witch, seducing the prince and all of his friends!”
“Oh yeah,” I muttered to myself. “I forgot about the duel event.”
If Marie picked up the glove, she would in effect have agreed to a match.
Raymond panicked. “I have no idea what the words coming out of your mouth even mean half the time! Do you even understand what a duel is?!”
Actually, now that I thought about it, Marie would be represented by someone else in the duel. In the end, it’d be Prince Julius and his friends against Angelica.
Social shame compelled men to represent themselves in duels, but women got away with using proxies all the time. In the game, the protagonist earned the protection of whatever love interest she had the highest affection with when the villainess issued her challenge. But I couldn’t shake a bad feeling about how things were panning out here…
“Angelica, you disappoint me.” The prince regarded his fiancée with disdain. His patience had run out, and anger colored his face. “Marie, pick it up. Don’t worry, you have me with you. I will act as your proxy in this fight.”
“I can’t let you get away with taking all of the glory, Your Highness,” Jilk cut in. “Per academy rules, a girl isn’t limited to one man as her stand-in. I volunteer as well.”
Greg punched a fist into his open palm. “Sounds interesting. Count me in. I don’t care who my opponent is, bring it on!”
“This is why I avoid meatheads like you,” Brad said, sounding annoyed. “That said, I can’t let that ‘harlot’ insult fly. I’ll make you take that back, Angelica. After the match is over, you can apologize to Marie. I’ll be participating, too, of course.”
Chris folded his arms over his chest. “I’m confident in my sword skills. I’ll be Marie’s blade in battle.”
Marie wiped tears from her eyes. “Thank you, everyone… I’m scared, but having you with me brings me comfort. I’ll accept this duel, Miss Angelica. We’ll fight against you together.”
Seeing his mistress play the heroic protagonist, Kyle sighed in exasperation. I remembered his sarcastic streak, but he had grace to match his handsome looks. “You truly are a fool, Mistress. Have you forgotten that I’m here, too? I’ll do what I can to support you.”

Marie smiled. “Thank you, Kyle.”
As I suspected.
“This is the reverse harem route,” I said.
“There he goes, saying weird crap again,” Daniel grumbled. “Anyway, what’s going to happen to the duke’s daughter now? Is there anyone at this school who’d take on five guys—let alone *those* five?”
Raymond shook his head. “The prince has top scores, and the rest of them are pretty impressive in their own right. No guy *could* take them all. Besides, Chris is the son of the Sword Saint, and he’s expected to inherit the title. No one can compete with that.”
Half the men in our class detested battle to begin with, and no normal person would willingly fight the prince himself. Even worse, this wasn’t a mock battle—it was a *real* duel. Even the men who had faithfully followed Angelica wanted no part in it.
Angelica’s eyes swept across the room, but not a single boy would meet her gaze.
Greg egged them on. “Oh, come on, is there no one out there benevolent enough to help out a lady in need? Some of you used to trail her everywhere. You’re going to make me feel sorry for her at this rate.” He turned to Angelica. “You asked for this duel. You better not back out just because no one wants to stand in for you.”
People jeered as Angelica’s situation became clear. Students were forbidden from seeking a stand-in from outside the academy. The unwritten reason behind the rule was basically, *It’s a duel between children; we can’t let adults intervene.*
In the game, Angelica further shamed herself by breaking that rule.
The other noble ladies reacted coldly.
“Hey, who wants to take bets on how much she embarrasses herself?”
“It’ll be over when she runs home crying. This isn’t even going to be a duel. She has no one to represent her.”
“Who knows, maybe she’ll represent herself. I hope they beat her senseless.”
When school began, these same girls had been so meek in Angelica’s shadow. I couldn’t believe a simple role reversal went to their heads so fast. They likely thought this the end of Angelica’s engagement to the prince, which meant they could disregard her social status. As far as they were concerned, her life was ruined.
In the game, I think she ended up with some hideous dude from the countryside.
Angelica put on a brave face, but as she surveyed the other students, I could see her panic.
Then our eyes met.
This hot-tempered girl who’d never realized the consequences of her actions looked at me with desperation. Her eyes pleaded for help, like she knew she was grasping at straws but couldn’t stop herself. After a beat, she

turned her gaze away and gritted her teeth. “Even…even if no one will represent me…”
Greg snorted with laughter. “What’s wrong? What happened to all that bravado a minute ago?”
Greg and the other high lords-to-be regarded her coolly. The most aloof was the prince. It clearly didn’t matter to him anymore that he was speaking to his former fiancée. “Angelica, I hope you’ve prepared yourself for this. You can’t take it back now. You threw the glove.”
I don’t know why, but I stepped forward.
Olivia latched onto my arm and peered up at me anxiously. “Um…what are you doing?”
Honestly, why isn’t she the one over here?
Right now, Marie occupied the spot that belonged to Olivia. No, that wasn’t right. She wasn’t simply “occupying”; she’d *stolen* it.
What am I doing?
I already knew the answer.
Daniel tried to stop me, too. “You idiot. Why are you getting involved? You can’t win!”
Raymond was right beside him. “We already know how this goes. Even if, theoretically, you *could* win, there’d be a mountain of consequences. You’re up against the prince!”
I just grinned. “Well, you know…I really, *really* hate those guys.”
I wasn’t close to Angelica. While I did sympathize with her for the heaps of scorn abruptly turned on her, I had my own reasons for going forward.
I pushed people aside and stepped through the crowd. Everyone’s eyes turned to me.
“Okay, okay, here I am! I volunteer to act as her representative in the duel!”
I lifted my hand casually as I strolled into the center of the room.
All around, people shot me looks as if to say, *Dude, read the room!*
I ignored them all.
Greg studied my face. “Who even are you?”
Apparently he really didn’t know. That was me and my sad reality as a background character.
Brad examined me as well. His tone suggested I was obviously beneath him. “I think I heard about a young, accomplished adventurer. He left his home and became a baron. Could you be him?”
Well, considering my lowly status and middling grades, it wasn’t a surprise they hadn’t noticed me sooner.
“More importantly, Miss Angelica, recognize me as your proxy in the fight. Come on, hurry up.”
She looked conflicted. “Uh, um…”
“Come on, say it. You won’t have anything to worry about once you do.”
“I-I recognize you as my stand-in,” she finally stammered, still confused.
Satisfied, I turned to the prince. “There you have it. I, Leon Fou Bartfort, will act as her representative in this match. You’ve got five on your side,

correct? I'd like to confirm the rules of the match, but before we do, can we clarify the stakes?"
Marie gawked at me. Evidently, she hadn't expected anyone to intervene. But lately, I'd been watching this girl through Luxion, collecting information, collating my suspicions…and given her shock, I was pretty damn sure I was right.
This Marie was like me—an outsider. She had reincarnated into this world as well, or something along those lines. She knew how the game was supposed to go.
I assumed that meant she was probably also a woman in her previous life, though I guess guys could like otome games. But it'd have to be a guy who was fine manipulating other dudes into waiting on him hand and foot as he built himself a reverse harem…
Yeah, you know what, either way, that sucks. But my bet's on girl.
I turned to Angelica. "Why did you decide to challenge her, anyway? I need you to be honest with me about this."
She stared at me as if she couldn't believe how I'd just thrown myself into this. Then she composed herself. "My wish is simple—Marie should stay away from the prince."
Whispers erupted from the crowd.
"Did you hear her?"
"Oh my! Don't tell me she's jealous?"
"She's washed up. She doesn't even have the appeal to win back the prince, so she's resorting to brute force."
Angelica lowered her eyes and ground her teeth together.
I turned toward Marie. "All right, so what do you want out of it?"
The prince stepped in front of Marie, blocking her from view. "You're really that desperate to break us apart?" he said to Angelica. "It seems you don't understand who the real 'witch' here is. Even if you did manage to separate us, I will never have feelings for you!"
"I am aware," Angelica mumbled. "I *understand*, but getting her away from you is the last thing I can do for you as your—"
I clapped my hands together, ignoring the indignant looks from the prince and his posse. "Save the sentimentality and sniping for later. Hurry up and tell me your conditions for this duel. I don't have all day."
Marie stepped around the prince and faced Angelica. "I-If I win, I don't want you to do cruel things like this anymore. I don't think it's right to wield your house's influence like a weapon and force others to do your bidding."
That line sounded awfully familiar. In fact, I was pretty sure it was supposed to be the protagonist's. Marie had literally lifted the words straight from the game.
"Okay," I said, "then if we win, the prince breaks things off with you. If we lose, Angelica stays away from you. Next, let's discuss how we're going to do this. How about borrowing the arena and settling it in Armor? That's the usual way we do things, yeah?"

A few duels, never many, broke out every year. Even if the motivations were petty, boys got eager to take part for the opportunity to show off to potential brides. Customarily, we used Armor—powered mobile suits—as even owning one was ample proof of your wealth. Furthermore, by participating in a duel, you could prove your combat capability and potentially earn prestige, conditional on your victory.
Chris looked ready to cut me down right where I stood, never mind his lack of weapon tonight. “You seriously think you can beat us? If you don’t want to get hurt, you better back off. Someone as weak as you wouldn’t even last a minute against us.”
He didn’t have any idea who I was, so he lumped me in with others whose abilities never stood out. He assumed they’d blow me to smithereens.
“Come again?” I asked. “What makes you so sure I’m going to lose?”
Everyone around me burst into laughter.
“Did you hear him?”
“He actually thinks he can win! That boy doesn’t know his place.”
“He’s got a talent for making people laugh, though!”
“Ridiculous. His peerage was clearly a fluke.”
It wasn’t just women sneering at me now, but men. Not that I could blame them. These five lordlings were the most talented of the first-years, and their status far exceeded pretty much everyone’s. No one in their right mind would ever challenge them.
Greg came up close, getting in my face. “Just a little bit ago, some boys called out to a group of girls. Then one of the girls’ servants sent them flying, and they ran out of here with their tails tucked between their legs. Weren’t you one of them?”
He already knew the answer, of course. What a jerk.
“You won’t even put up a proper fight,” he spat. “If all you want is the spotlight, save yourself the humiliation and run home now, pipsqueak.”
Now this guy really knew how to tap into real intimidation. He’d had all that combat experience, after all.
I have to hand it to them. They’re a commendable group of men, trying so hard to protect a poor, defenseless girl.
Although if a clueless bystander were to pass by, they’d think Angelica was the one being mercilessly bullied.
Yes, *commendable*, indeed.
“Oh, I’m so sorry, are we trying to settle this verbally?” I asked in my most genteel manner. “Is debate your preferred method of battle? What a shame, I don’t have the skills for that. Then again, our side *did* demand a duel, so if you insist, I suppose I have no choice. Words it is, then. We’ll settle this on a stage, moderators and all.”
Greg hated people who fought with words rather than weapons. A vein bulged on his forehead.
Jilk intervened. “Let’s do one-on-one with Armor. However, there are five of us. If you can find more people in time for the duel, you’re welcome to

select an additional four to match up against us. And as summer break is almost upon us…we should be able to borrow the arena the day after the closing ceremony."
I nodded, appreciating how promptly he'd put together the terms. That said, there weren't many days left. I doubted I'd be able to recruit enough people to fill out a roster.
"One against five, huh?" I stroked my chin. "Well, as long as I only have to face one of you at a time, that shouldn't be a problem."
Jilk regarded me with skepticism. "You seriously intend to face us? It's rare nowadays, but it's not unheard of for a duel to result in fatality."
Once, the rule had been to put your life on the line in a duel, but at the academy, that was largely obsolete. Nowadays, you only died if you were particularly unlucky.
"Oh, don't worry about me. I'll be fine," I assured him. "But may I ask you a question?"
After a pause, he said, "What is it?"
"Why do you all look so confident that you'll come out of this unscathed? I mean, I get it…you want to look cool in front of the girl you love. But isn't it a bit naive to assume *you* won't be the ones dying?"
Jilk's eyes narrowed. It was kind of unsettling to see someone so typically reserved lose his cool. "I heard of your accomplishments, but it seems everyone overestimates you. You're not even capable of measuring your opponent's strength."
"Enough, Jilk." Prince Julius stepped between us and looked at me. "You said your name was Leon? We aren't playing around. I hope *you're* ready for this."
Marie watched our interactions with a look of genuine uncertainty on her face. I was sure she hadn't expected this turn of events at all. Little late to panic now. If she didn't want to risk this, she shouldn't have egged Angelica on in the first place. She was the one causing *me* grief.
For what it's worth, I'm normally a pretty timid person.
"Be sure to bid your farewells in advance to your little lover, Prince," I told him. "Remember, the other four won't be affected even if your team loses. Prepare to watch from afar as the rest of them enjoy her without you."
He glared at me.
You're the one who wanted to play ball. Don't get mad at me.
How could he be so unconcerned that he and all of the future high lords of the kingdom were being seduced by a single woman? Worse yet, now he was treating Angelica like she didn't even exist.
I wish this stupid prince would realize he's got a fiancée right in front of him.

Chapter 8:
Duel

THE DAY AFTER the party, Marie perched on her bed with her knees pulled up to her chest, chewing on her thumbnail. “Who the hell is that background character? Why is he ruining my perfect plan?!”
Since the party, she had cooped up in her room, begging off on spending time with anyone. The love interests accepted her withdrawal, assuming she was in shock from having a duel thrust upon her.
“It’s going to be fine,” she reassured herself. “There’s no way those five are going to lose. Besides, he’s a *background character*. He looks absolutely puny. I’m sure they’ll be fine. Ugh, but his face really pissed me off. Reminds me of my dead older brother.”
Someone knocked on her door, interrupting her mumbles about her worthless excuse for an older sibling. Before she could respond, Kyle stepped inside.
“H-hey. At least wait for me to tell you to come in!”
Kyle snorted. “Fine, I’ll be more careful next time.”
“I gave you the same warning not that long ago.”
From the outside, Kyle looked the perfect servant; he briskly and efficiently prepared her breakfast. The problem was his slightly twisted personality. He was a leftover at the slave market no one else wanted. According to his backstory in the game, his foul attitude ensured purchasers always returned him.
“I packed today’s breakfast full of vegetables,” he said.
“I *hate* vegetables.”
“Please eat them anyway. You sound pitiful whining like that, Mistress.”
The way Kyle spoke to Marie, people would hardly believe he was the servant. In the game, he always did his job properly and seemed like an adorable little-brother-type character, even though he could be cold and prickly. But living with him every day, he really got on Marie’s nerves.
Well, at least he’s cute, so I’ll forgive him.
The two had only been together for a couple of weeks, but Marie did appreciate how much he looked after her. She would have had a much easier life in her previous world if she’d had a guy who would take care of the household chores and treat her right.
“How are things with the duel progressing?”
Kyle poured her drink and slid the cup over to her. “It seems His Highness and the others won’t have any trouble borrowing the arena for the event. The academy was reluctant to agree, but Mister Jilk and Mister Brad worked tirelessly to persuade them. Judging by what I heard from the other servants, Leon’s grades are barely in the bottom of the top tier. Everyone says it won’t even be a competition.”

“Oh yeah?” Marie’s shoulders slumped in relief, and she dug into her breakfast.
“You could stand to praise me a little bit more.” Kyle scowled. “It was a lot of work for me to go around collecting information from all the other servants.”
“Right. Thanks.”
For some reason, Kyle enjoyed doing favors she hadn’t asked for, then demanding her gratitude. Marie had to remind herself he was capable and good-looking, so it was worth enduring his strange behavior.
She was so compassionate. Any other girl would have thrown him out by now, but here I am being generous and forgiving.
That background character might have slightly derailed her plans, but she would still be able to get rid of Angelica.
What an idiot. All I had to do was push her buttons a little, and she challenged me to a duel.
Marie knew about Angelica’s short fuse, and so had intentionally set her off at the party. First, Marie kept standing incredibly close to Prince Julius. Then, when she was sure Angelica was watching, she glued herself to the other guys, holding hands with them and flirting.
After the duel, all that remained before the academy recessed for the summer was to make preparations for the long break. Marie would spend some time in the capital’s dungeon collecting items, then she’d go off and collect the last pieces she needed for her plan.
These “last pieces” were equipment intended for the protagonist, of course. They featured heavily in the game’s story moving forward.
I’m really looking forward to this. Just a little bit longer, and they’ll be calling me a saint!

***

“It’s not even been twenty-fours and look at this mess.” I crossed my arms over my chest, surveying my room. It had been completely trashed. I glanced up at the ceiling.
Luxion, who had evidently gone invisible during the madness, rematerialized and drifted down until he was eye level with me. With his built-in projector, he showed me a short clip of what had happened.
“While you were out, other students slipped inside and vandalized the place,” Luxion explained. “The culprits are from your usual group, though their ringleaders represent a higher social set.”
In the video, I could see a group of wealthy boys ordering around others with less cachet. The crony brigade included Daniel and Raymond.
“So those two were a part of this,” I muttered.
“That friendship didn’t last long.”
“They just prioritized their own futures. Look at those gloomy expressions. You can hardly blame them.” I shot Luxion a look. “You’re heartless.”

He seemed annoyed. “You’re the last person I want to hear that from, Master. Anyway, you might want to know, some students are taking bets on the outcome of the duel.”
Considering the clip Luxion showed me, I suppose I could be considered the underdog. But that would do no good for the gamblers; absolutely no one would be betting on me, which meant no odds to speak of.
“Seems like I’m not very popular.”
“You expected otherwise? By the way, preparations on my end are complete. What you requested will arrive the day of the duel. What will you be doing until then?”
I paused to think. “Can you get me ten thousand gold coins? Wait, would five hundred platinum coins have a better impact? Regardless, I need to bet it all on me. We’ve gotta make this a bit more fun for everyone.”
“You really are a cruel new human. Wouldn’t you have been better off mediating between them instead of going out of your way to participate in this duel? I don’t see the point in fanning the flames.”
After a moment of silence, I said, “Are you telling me to sit by and watch as Marie dates all five of them? I’m the type that’d rather solve all my problems in one sweep.”
“In other words, the type that fails often.”
“I don’t plan to involve myself any longer than I have to. Just let me clean it up. I only stepped in because I felt like it. It was a whim… Seeing the way they looked down on everyone pissed me off.”
“If you say so.”
Despite my flippancy, I was a little troubled. The academy was its own little world, and it had its own opinions about how things would inevitably end. But word of the duel between a duke’s daughter and the prince and his friends would spread to the rest of society soon enough. That could be trouble.
I shrugged it off. “After I get those coins, I’ll go find the bookies and make my bet.”
If I bet that much on myself, the other students would unanimously put their money on the prince and his crew. None of them would question why I had so much to squander—they would just assume I was using the money I’d earned during my dungeon adventures.
Now if anyone found out how easily Luxion could produce gold and rare metals, they wouldn’t hesitate to kill me to steal him away. That was the last thing I needed.
Those concerns aside, I was actually looking forward to this duel.
“I’ll get it ready for you immediately,” Luxion said. “Please come to the harbor to pick it up. Oh, and it seems your two friends are waiting outside.”
He was right. When I stepped out of my room, Daniel and Raymond were standing there, eyes turned to the floor, looking quite pale.
Raymond’s voice was barely a whisper. “S-sorry.”

Daniel looked full of remorse. “We were told not to go near you anymore… And we can’t disobey them.”
Both of them looked about ready to break down in tears.
I walked past them. “You two should bet on me for the duel if you want to rake in the cash. Just so you know. And…I’m sorry for causing you trouble.”
I left quickly, saying nothing more.

***

Five men gathered in the academy’s cafeteria.
“What are we going to do? We finally get a duel, but the betting is a moot point if no one puts their money on the other guy.”
“Yeah, but everyone knows the prince and his friends are going to win.”
“If only the other side could get five people together… Or wait, maybe we could change it a little? Have people bet on how many of the heirs that moron can take down before he’s defeated?”
These were the bookies trying to set up bets for the duel. I strolled up to them, pulling a wagon behind me. They looked up, dumbstruck.
“Sorry you boys are having such a hard time setting this up,” I said, sliding into their conversation. “Let’s keep the bets simple, okay? Either I win or I lose. And while we’re at it, I’d like to bet all of this on my win.”
I opened the box behind me to reveal a glimmering mountain of platinum coins—far more valuable than gold. The five bookies sucked in a collective breath at the sight.
“You’ll have no problems with getting other people to bet now, right?”
No skin off my back, either way. I had nothing to lose, here. And everyone knew the odds weren’t in my favor. Once they realized they could bet against me and make a fortune, plenty of idiots would dip into their savings or go into debt to participate.
One of the bookies approached to inspect my money. “This is all platinum, isn’t it? Are…are you sure you want to bet all of this?”
In my previous world, it was the equivalent of ten to twenty million yen. Impressive, no doubt. Far too much cash for any student to be handling.
“Of course,” I said. “I *am* the man who cleared a dungeon on my own. What’s wrong with me betting every last coin I have on myself?”
The bookies swallowed hard before setting about the task of making sure my coins were authentic.
“We’ll definitely have people coming out to bet now!”
“I’ll let everyone know immediately!”
“This is going to be an exciting match!”
It was good to see them enjoying themselves.
A voice suddenly cut in from behind me. “Bartfort? I’d like to talk to you.”
I glanced over my shoulder. I was expecting Nicks, or maybe Jenna, but to my surprise, it was Angelica.
The whole cafeteria went silent.

***

Angelica guided me to an empty room, far from anyone else.
This is where the boys usually have their tea parties. Did she…rent the place?
"When I told the professor I needed a room so I could speak to you privately, he happily obliged," she explained. "It seems you two have a good relationship."
No way! My master went out of his way for me? Not that I could be surprised. As the living embodiment of gentlemanly behavior, it was only natural for him to show such consideration. Nevertheless, I was so touched I nearly cried.
"Bartfort, I want you to withdraw from this duel," Angelica finally blurted. Her face had grown gaunt, heavy with exhaustion.
"Backing out this late in the game is only going to make me look bad," I lied. I wasn't worried about my reputation. I wanted to participate, so I was going to.
She gave a dry, empty laugh. "You've already been hit by the repercussions of this, haven't you? They made a mess of your room, and *they* plan to keep hitting us as hard as they can until the day of the duel."
Apparently "they" were going to do their best to make sure we didn't stand a chance of winning. Prince Julius and his friends were, in my estimation, blissfully unaware. Their flunkies were carrying all this out on their behalf.
Wow, such impressive loyalty from the goon squad!
Unfortunately for those schmucks, they were messing with the wrong guy. I was a background character, but I was also an extremely petty man. Thus, I planned to return everything they threw my way in full, with interest.
Normally, I'd be inclined to wait for all the storm and fury to die off, but I'd already decided I wasn't going to take this lying down.
"I don't have any power. Not anymore," Angelica confessed. "Whatever you're expecting from me, there is nothing I can do for you."
I sighed. "Let me guess, your family had some harsh words for you, didn't they?"
She wrapped her arms around herself, squeezing tightly. "They called me reckless for demanding a duel. But I…I had to do *something*! I didn't care what. All I could think about was getting that woman away from the prince. My mind went blank. When I told my family that, they ordered me to stay put and keep quiet. It's all over for me. If I'm lucky, I'll be sent off to stay under house arrest in one of the border regions. If I'm unlucky—"
She'd be forced to take her own life. Suicide in the name of repentance. Not that I was going to let it come to that.
"You seem to have the wrong idea," I said. "I don't care that you come from a duke's household."
Angelica jerked her head up and stared at me in surprise.

“Then why in the world did you volunteer yourself?! Are you an idiot? You *must* be an idiot! Listen to me, whether you win or lose, your life is already over. Our opponents are the future king and other high lords. What good will it do to provoke them?” she finished, breathless.
I gave her an enigmatic grin. “Who cares? I don’t need status or honor. Do you know what it’s like for those of us at the bottom of this caste system? I poured my blood, sweat, and tears into becoming independent, but now I have to spend every day trying to suck up to girls I don’t even like. I’m tired of it. If this is what my life’s gonna be, I figure I can at least give the people I hate the most a sock in the face before I drop out and leave.”
“But what of your family?!”
I shrugged. “I’m an independent knight. Well, a provisional one. Regardless, my family is of a separate house.”
“Pr-provisional?” she echoed. At last she seemed to understand what I was trying to tell her.
“You want to keep Marie away from the prince. I don’t like him or the other high lords, so I want to punch their lights out. See? We’re a perfect team.”
And if I was honest, much like Angelica, I just didn’t care for Marie.
She took several steps back. “Are you insane? Your opponents are at the top of our grade.”
That wasn’t going to be a problem. If we were in our third—no, even our second year—then it might have been a different story. But at their current level, I could handle the love interests no sweat.
“It’ll be fine,” I assured her. “I might not seem it, but I’m fairly strong.”
“You expect me to believe you?!” Angelica huffed. “I’ve heard adventurers who clear dungeons end up with a few screws loose. You must be one of them!”
“Hey, rude much? I’m not an idiot. I’m doing this *because* I know I have a good chance of winning. Besides, you’re the one who started this whole duel!”
She averted her eyes. “Th-that’s why I’m telling you to back down! I’m sorry about this, and I’ll take responsibility for my actions. You can stay here at the academy. I can’t get you involved. It was enough that you volunteered yourself at the party.”
From her perspective, I jumped in to help her without regard for the consequences while everyone else looked at her like she was the enemy. She might even see me as some kind of hero. Oops?
“Nah… I’ve come this far. Backing out now would be kinda…embarrassing.”
“You realize Greg and Chris will be two of your opponents, right? All jokes aside, they’re terrifyingly strong.”
She was right. And it wasn’t just the two of them; the other three also stood head and shoulders above the rest of our grade. The *in our grade* bit was an important qualifier, however.
“One more thing,” she said. “What are you thinking, betting all that money on yourself?”

I wanted to explain that I actually hated gambling, but instead…
“Why don’t you do it, too?” I grinned. “You’ll make a ton.”
“Ridiculous! Do I look like I’m in desperate need of money to you?”
This is exactly why spoiled rich girls like you are…! You know what, never mind.
“Their harassment has an expiration date. Only a few more days until the duel.” And I left to return to my room.

***

At last, the day of the duel arrived.
The academy’s arena was enormous. A magical barrier protected spectators to ensure their safety. Countless students had battled each other on these same grounds. The charged atmosphere probably should have worked me up into some kind of lather, but I felt nothing.
I changed my clothes in the waiting room and peeked in the mirror.
“It looks good on you,” Luxion said. “Not that you should expect any less. I prepared it for you, after all.”
My dark gray suit perfectly matched the color of the Armor I was about to pilot. The undergarment clung tightly to my skin. Over that, I wore pants and a vest. It came up high around the neck, offering extra protection. I wasn’t too crazy about the spandex-like clothing that showed every line on my body, though.
“This wasn’t what I was expecting.” I frowned. “Make me a new one.”
“Denied,” Luxion said without missing a beat. “The design and color may differ from your request, but they serve the same function. Don’t make extra work for me purely on account of an imperfect match with your little preferences. Now swallow your complaints and get to work.”
Scowling, I started out the door, only to find Olivia waiting there for me.
“Oh!” She stood up from leaning against the wall and rushed over, so close hardly any space was left between us. “Um, so…there’s nothing I can do to help, but I’m rooting for you, Leon! I mean it!”
It felt strange having the protagonist of the game cheer me on. In truth, she was supposed to be the one on the other side, surrounded by Prince Julius and the other love interests.
“Did you bet on me? If so, you made the right decision. We’ll make a killing after I win.” I flashed her a thumbs-up and started to turn away.
“Huh? I haven’t bet anything. Gambling is wrong.”
I froze. “Oh…okay.”
She looked up at me with those innocent eyes, and I couldn’t help but remember how much money I’d coughed up for my bet. Suddenly I felt embarrassed for myself.
Is this the true power of the protagonist?

My heart was so tainted that her innocence was blinding. It almost looked like the sun was shining behind her.
The two of us left the waiting room and headed toward the arena. Five people waited on the other side. They proudly displayed their Armors, showing off to the audience. More accurately, these powered mobile suits were “robots” rather than Armor, especially since they were each nearly three meters tall. They could even fly through the air.
“Those are some flashy paint jobs, I guess,” I said, making sure to sound unimpressed.
Lined up next to each other, starting with the prince’s white Armor, each suit was more gaudily decorated than the last.
The crowd booed the moment I stepped into the arena. I glanced up at the stands to see Daniel and Raymond mixed in with the crowd. They made sure no one saw them before they flashed their red notes at me—proof they bet on me. Those who bet on the prince and his friends carried blue notes.
“Those two…” I mumbled. “Guess I better give it my all.”
Angelica rushed over the moment I stepped up, no longer showing any restraint. “Hey! Why don’t you have an Armor?! You acted all smug and confident, so you better not tell me you’ve come unprepared!”
The arena had no ceiling, so when I looked up, I could see the clear blue sky. I pointed a finger up, drawing her gaze to a black point in the sky.
“Don’t worry. It just arrived.”
Luxion was tucked inside my vest, hidden from view. He spoke in a quiet voice only I could hear. “Arroganz is here.”
An enormous box came plummeting through the air. It slowed at the last second, gently settling on the ground. The large panel on the top fell off first, and the side panels followed in a domino effect, revealing the full majesty of the suit within. I had last used this armor in a test run while doing work around my island, but here in the arena, it looked like the grim weapon it was intended to be. I suddenly felt guilty for having used it to dig holes.
“What exactly does ‘Arroganz’ mean?” I asked Luxion quietly. The word had a familiar ring to it. I felt like I’d heard it somewhere before. It sounded impressive though, so I personally liked it.
“A play on a foreign word that suits you perfectly,” he answered.
“Really? Huh. I guess you are considerate sometimes.”
Modern mainstream Armor trended compact and lightweight. Arroganz, on the other hand, was built sturdy—twice the size of a normal Armor. Since its main purpose was combat, it lacked all the snappy decorations covering the others. It looked plain, in other words. Furthermore, where the prince and the other high lords’ Armors were slim and built for speed, mine was slow and heavily armored.
The moment the crowd saw my Armor, they burst into laughter.

This was an enormous event, attended by students from each year. All who could had come for the opportunity to bear witness to our majestic crown prince. Thousands filled the seats, yet the arena could have sat tens of thousands more, so empty rings reached up to the sky.
Angelica regarded me with skepticism. “You really intend to fight them in *that*? Is it a Lost Item? You do know that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s strong, right? Lost Items are called that because they can’t be replicated, not because they’re inherently powerful.”
Olivia clapped her hands over her cheeks, tilting her head. “But it’s actually kind of cute!”
“You have a strange sense of beauty, then.” Angelica frowned at her. “It may not be completely boorish, but it’s still unsuited for battle.”
Modern tactics favored offense over defense, aiming to swiftly take out your enemies before getting hit. Simply put, heavily armored suits like mine were outdated.
Personally, I prefer them, though.
“You’ll understand once you see me in action.” I left the two of them and stepped out onto the field, approaching my suit.
A purple, lightweight robot with several lances on its back landed in the center of the ring. Thanks to the color scheme, I knew this was Brad.
The hatch on its chest popped open to reveal the man himself. “I admit, you’ve got guts to show up here, but do you really think you can beat me in that decrepit piece of junk? My Armor was crafted by a skilled artisan. Know how much platinum I paid?”
He rambled on and on about how impressive his Armor was, as I opened the hatch of my own suit, hopped inside, and grasped the controls, which resembled joysticks. The hatch closed and my vision of the outside world was cut off.
“Arroganz, activate,” Luxion said, booting up the robot.
The screen in front of me came to life, the image so clear I could’ve still been outside. The robot’s interior adjusted to fit my body, securing my head, neck, and torso in place. Once all ignition sequences completed, I looked ahead to see Brad, evidently still bragging.
“Is he still going at it?” I asked, exasperated.
“According to his explanation, the objects on his back are drones,” Luxion informed me. “Shall I prepare a counter for them?”
“With his skills, there’s no need. Purple-man generally always goes down the second he gets hit.” Seriously, he caused me so much trouble in the game.
Arroganz stepped forward, prompting Brad to sneer. Maybe he was upset I didn’t seem to be paying attention.
Not a problem. Luxion heard everything, so I already know all your special abilities.
“Your attitude really pisses me off,” Brad spat, then slammed his hatch closed and took up a battle stance.

Time for me to ready my weapon as well. “Okay…let’s go with Blade One.” Unfortunately, when I reached into the storage box on my back to retrieve said weapon, I found myself holding…a shovel. Well, back when I used my suit primarily to dig holes, this had been the most appropriate tool for the task. It was enormous, too, since I specifically made it for Arroganz. But no matter how impressive its size, it was still a mere shovel.
“What?!” I yelped.
“Last time you used Arroganz, you registered the shovel as Blade One,” Luxion said dutifully.
“Give me a sword!”
“You asked for Blade One.”
That little jerk is doing this on purpose.
I took a stance with shovel in hand, and the crowd broke out into laughter once again.

Brad, on the other hand, was enraged. “Bastard, you dare condescend to me?!”
The referee on the field spoke, their voice echoing. “Combatants, first you must make your duel oaths—”
Too late; Brad leaped forward and couldn’t be stopped. He flew at me, his spear aimed straight for my torso, making it clear he intended to kill me. The tip of the spear glowed with activated magic.
Luxion was impressed. “That was an incredible charge.”
“Okay, you…” I muttered in annoyance.
The outside world couldn’t hear our exchange. I couldn’t let anyone find out about Luxion, after all.
My Armor instantly obeyed my command. Though it looked heavy, it easily sidestepped the incoming blow and captured Brad by the arms.
“Let go of me!” he howled.
“Sure, but calm down for a bit,” I said. “Oaths first, my guy. Let’s do this properly so it’s not a huge headache later.”

***

As Arroganz moved, Angelica felt cold sweat dripping down her forehead. Olivia stood beside her, hands clasped as she cheered Leon on. She was completely ignorant about Armor and how it worked. “Miss Angelica, it looks like he’s really trying his best!”
All Angelica could do was give the girl an uneasy nod. Inwardly, she was confused. What was that just now? How can he move so fast, like it’s nothing? That shouldn’t be possible, not with that weight. The heavier the Armor, the greater the burden on the pilot. What is that?
The speed surprised her, but the power did, too. It blew the mind to see that Armor restrain Brad with only one hand.
Brad’s Armor was specifically prepared by the Field House for its heir. It’s not some mass-produced suit. And Leon was able to stop it one-handed?
Angelica watched the two combatants exchange oaths as proxies in someone else’s duel, basically agreeing there would be no grudge even if someone died in the course of the match. Her eyes were glued to Leon’s Armor, but she still caught the voices of the crowd echoing around her.
“Come on, hurry up already.”
“I bet my entire fortune on the prince. Best way to get rich quick.”
“I know what you mean, I even borrowed money from home to bet with!”
Everyone was desperate for Leon to lose quickly. Some of them had gone into great debt to put bets on Julius and his friends’ victory, hoping to make some extra cash.
A grin spread on Angelica’s lips. “Ah ha…ha ha ha!”
Startled and perhaps somewhat frightened, Olivia glanced over at Angelica. “Um, is something the matter?”

“I can’t help but laugh,” Angelica confessed. “That man truly is cruel.”
Olivia immediately retorted, “He is not! Leon is a very kind person!”
“Indeed. You’re right,” Angelica said placatingly.
But why did he align himself with me? I understand he’s confident in his ability to win, but there’s nothing for him to gain by taking my side in this. He’s too smart not to realize that, surely.

***

Brad was panicking.
The inside of the suit was cramped, and as Brad gasped for air, he felt his own warm breath pour right back over his skin. “What the heck was that?”
The plating of his Armor warped where Arroganz had seized him. Brad’s suit was made with a tough metal imbued with magic to protect it. Most attacks couldn’t even leave a dent. No other Armor could have put a scratch on him just by grabbing him.
Worse, when Arroganz restrained him, Brad was unable to move. He struggled to fight against it, but it didn’t look like Leon was even trying that hard to immobilize him.
Now that the match was about to officially commence, Brad no longer possessed the calm confidence of before. “Guess I have no choice but to use these…”
Several small spears with no handles were affixed to his back, long, narrow, and cone-shaped. They could float through the air with magic. Brad wanted to use his regular spear to beat Leon so he could show his bravery to Marie, but he was painfully aware of his lack of skill in close combat, hence the magic spears.
I’m going to lose if I don’t do something. I can’t let that happen… Not in front of Marie!
The ace up his sleeve was his skill with magic. He had developed a special technique with the four spears that allowed him to assault opponents from all directions at once.
“All right, combatants, begin!”
The moment the referee gave the signal, Brad released the four spears.
“No matter how impressive his Armor might be, he won’t be able to take a simultaneous attack from four sides,” Brad mumbled.
But no sooner had he spoken those words than the dark gray suit flashed through the air and appeared right in front of him. Brad watched as Leon lifted his shovel, then swung it down.
“Wha—?”

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The harsh clang of metal echoed through the arena as I sent Brad flying into the arena wall.

“Wow, that had some power behind it,” I mused.
The overwhelming capability of my own Armor ended the battle before Brad could even launch a single attack. One smack with my shovel broke the spiked, purple helmet on his head.
“That’s not even Arroganz’s full power,” Luxion said. “I’m impressed with the new humans’ ability to move their Armor with magic, but that’s the only technique they have that warrants any attention. They have too many ridiculous adornments to take seriously.”
Is he holding a grudge because they laughed at Arroganz?
Well, it made sense; Luxion created the suit, after all.
I approached the damaged purple Armor that lay smashed into the side of the arena wall. Brad still managed to move it somehow, so I slammed my foot down on him. His suit creaked under my weight.
“St-stop! It hurts! Someone, help!” he cried.
His robot was an absolute mess, but my shovel was still in fine condition.
Maybe this thing actually is suited for battle.
Ignoring Brad’s cries, I said, “Careful, I might squash you. You better hurry up and admit defeat.”
“It’s so like you to completely overpower your opponent and twist their arm into yielding, Master,” Luxion said. “The word *underhanded* has never suited any person as well it suits you.”
“Are you being passive-aggressive again?”
“Not at all. I’m praising you,” he assured me. “Calling someone underhanded in battle is a compliment. You don’t fight unless you think you can win. I aspire to be like that as well.”
That’s right. I volunteered myself for this duel because I knew I could win.
I balanced the shovel on my shoulder and pressed my foot down on the purple bastard below me. Honestly, I wanted to punch him in the face. Memories of my past life were telling me, *Pound those annoying jerks into the ground*.
I gradually leaned more weight into my foot until the suit beneath me gave a strange sound as it warped under the pressure.
“Don’t have all day. You better hurry up and admit defeat now or it’ll be your life instead.”
“I admit it! I admit defeat!” Brad cried, nearly in tears.
I gently lifted my foot off of him, glancing back at the arena. The four spears Brad launched at the beginning of the battle had fallen, embedding themselves in the ground.
The crowd was silent.
I turned my gaze to the referee. “Brad admitted defeat.”
That brought them out of their daze, and they finally exclaimed, “Th-the victor is Leon Fou Bartfort!”
The applause was faint, coming from only a few people in the seats.
“There’s actually clapping,” I remarked in surprise.

I understood why Angelica and Olivia would be, but to my shock, a few others joined them. My headcam scanned the crowd, where I found my master standing with his head high as he proudly applauded me.
Even in the middle of a duel, this man is the perfect gentleman.

Chapter 9:
A Personal Grudge

THERE WERE A FEW REASONS why I volunteered to be a proxy in Angelica's duel. One of them was my own personal grudge against the five eligible bachelors I'd been forced to pursue when my little sister made me play this game for her.

The indignation of having to listen to their sweet nothings bubbled back up and whispered, *Destroy them.*

A cleanup crew removed the broken Amor parts littering the arena so that they wouldn't impede the following battles. They also took away the box Arroganz had descended in.

As I waited in the middle of the ring for my next opponent, I noticed something strange going on with the prince and his group. My suit managed to pick up their voices.

"I'll go next. I'll give you that Brad's kind of a pushover, but that suit's something else. It'd be too much for you guys," Greg was saying.

Chris's hackles rose. "Are you really trying to imply you're a better fighter than I am?"

The prince glanced over at me. "Bartfort has cleared a dungeon before. I see now why he was so confident: that Armor of his."

Jilk followed his prince's gaze. "It must be a Lost Item. Still, I've never heard of anyone discovering one so powerful. It seems more focused on strength than speed."

The crowd continued murmuring after the upset of Brad's loss. Most of the students had believed I would lose, and the prince and his friends would prevail. The money at stake was far from trivial. My outside microphone picked up some of their commentary, too.

"Well, there'd be no point in watching if it wasn't at least a bit exciting."

"Yeah, I guess. Anyway, I'm sure it'll be over in the next round."

They were still sure it would all end in their favor.

After reviewing the data he'd collected from our last battle, Luxion said, "I've finished implementing corrections for our next confrontation with a spear-wielder."

"Appreciated. Oh, look, Greg got his way."

Greg had leaped up into his red-painted Armor and entered the arena with an enormous spear in hand.

Luxion went over his analysis of my new opponent. "This Armor is far from mint condition; several points have been repaired multiple times. Numerous scratches and dents indicate this suit has seen a number of battles."

"Yep, this guy's pretty strong."

As Greg Fou Seberg's rough appearance suggested, he was the most experienced adventurer of his five pals. I couldn't turn my nose up at his preference for real combat experience. I'd relied on him a lot in the game.
Greg turned the point of his spear toward me. "Your name was Bartfort, right? I'll remember that. But this is the end of the line for you. That Lost Item seems to pack quite the punch, but it's still just an item. That's not *your* strength."
He was absolutely right. I almost wanted to applaud him for it. I couldn't argue at all.
"And so what?" I asked. "You know, you did this at the party, too—you sure like to run your mouth. If you want to talk so bad, why not invite *me* for tea next time?"
My taunts had immediate effect.
"I'll crush you to pieces!"
The referee bellowed, "Begin!"
Greg whipped his spear through the air, closing the distance between us. He'd watched my previous match, and he clearly had no intention of letting me attack first.
"Come on!" he jeered. "What happened to all that bravado?! Is this all you've got?!"
He thrust and slashed, swinging his weapon while I blocked each blow with my shovel. Metal ground against metal and sparks flew. Combined with the glow of his spear, it was almost blinding.
"Your moves are great," I said, and I meant it. "And you've got guts. There's just one problem…you need to pick better equipment!"
I deflected his spear with my shovel, overpowering his lightweight Armor with my sheer mass, and he lost his balance.
Greg tried to fly backward—these suits were made for aerial combat, after all—to get distance again, but I grabbed his right foot with my left hand.
"Y-you bastard!" he growled, and tried to jab at my hand with his spear. It did no damage, however, and my grip remained firm.
The man had impressive skills, but just like in the game, he had little interest in updating his equipment. He thought only second-rate warriors bothered with the latest advancements. As a result, his Armor today was older, a mass-produced suit dressed up fancy in a gaudy coat of red paint. I'd received numerous Game Overs on account of this deficiency.
Ditch that stupid pride of yours!
I crushed his suit's ankle with my hand. It wouldn't affect his actual leg, but the girls in the crowd nevertheless shrieked in horror. I pulled him close and drove my shovel through the helmet, then proceeded to crush one of Greg's robot arms with Arroganz's free hand.
"What's the matter? Go on, weren't you running?!" I reached for the other arm to destroy it, too.
"Dammit!" Greg wailed. "Let me go!"
"Like I'd actually listen to you, idiot."

I completely annihilated his suit, taking care his real body wasn't injured in the process. I yanked one of his robot arms completely off, leaving his real arm bare. Arroganz towered over him, twice the height of a normal mobile suit.
"Having fun?!" Greg spat. "You're not even a man! A real knight would fight fair! You're only beating us because you're using that Armor!"
"A knight?" I snorted. "I'm not a knight. Not yet. And *you're* losing because your Armor is an old piece of junk. Maybe you should have actually prepared. Or better yet, maybe you should think long and hard about why you failed to take me seriously in the first place. But hey, at least you have an excuse for why you didn't win, right? You can tell everyone 'his Armor was just so much more powerful than mine!'"
I ripped the hatch off his torso, exposing his face. Greg's expression contorted in rage and desperation as Arroganz continued to tear the red Armor to shreds. If I were Greg, I'd be traumatized.
Not that that was gonna stop me.
At last, Greg scrambled out of his useless suit and grabbed a broken piece of it from the ground, which he brandished it at me. "I haven't lost yet! I'll fight until my last breath!"
That insistence on never giving up didn't impress me at all. He looked like a stubborn idiot.
"Yes, I can see that," I said. "But you know—"
"No more talk, come at me!" He swung the broken piece of Armor at me, but I didn't even try to defend myself. That thing wasn't going to do jack to me.
"Unlike you," I continued, "I don't enjoy harassing the weak."
Greg froze. "Wh-what the—? What in the world are you saying?!"
"I said I don't enjoy tormenting those beneath me, unlike you and your friends. Are you really that hard of hearing?"
"Enough of your nonsense!" he howled. "We've never bullied the weak!"
"Ah ha ha ha!" I couldn't help cracking up. "You have some goddamn nerve. You had the gall to come out in that old heap of scrap metal, so confident in your abilities. But you underestimated me. You're no different than any other guy. I'm not top of the class, I'll give you that, but you acted so *tough* when we agreed to the duel. I expected you to put up a fight, but look at you. You're worthless. You're nobody. And you know what? It doesn't sit right with me to torment small fry, so I wanted to end this quickly. Not that you'd understand."
I took my time spelling it out for him: *You're weak.*
Ah, I really am too kind.
"Graaaaah!" Greg flung himself at me, trying to attack, but instead of looking brave, he looked pathetic. He'd denounced me in front of everyone as a weakling barely worthy of his time, and now he was getting the same treatment as he lost the duel. It was so tragic my heart broke.

Nah, not really. My heart was fine. These guys needed to be knocked down a peg.
Unable to watch from the sidelines any longer, the referee intervened, their voice weak with sympathy. “The victor is Leon Fou Bartfort! Greg Fou Seberg, please stand down. To everyone watching, please applaud our competitors!”
Greg slumped to his knees. Faint applause trickled from the stands.
“Just three left,” I mumbled.
“What a barbaric way to end it,” Luxion said. “A normal person would feel some compunction against driving their opponents mentally into a corner like that.”
“Like I care. They need to face reality. I hate people who let their privilege go to their heads.”
“Would you like to look in a mirror, Master?”
I knew what he meant—he didn’t even have to say anything. But hearing it pissed me off.

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The students in the crowd were disgusted.
“That match was brutal. That’s not how a knight fights.”
“Idiot, it’s a duel.”
“That’s two down already. I’m sure Chris will beat him, though.”
Their assessments of Greg had changed, however.
“I guess he was weak after all.”
“He was always so annoying with that talk of how important real combat experience is, but look at how easily he lost.”
“I expected more from him. I’m disappointed. I have no interest in weak guys like that.”
Angelica had watched the match with unease, sweat lining her brow. “He’s really going out of his way to show the difference in their power.”
She didn’t think Greg was weak at all. No, Leon and his Arroganz were simply far too strong. Greg was unlucky, but he hadn’t lost because of his outdated Armor. Even if he’d had the newest model, he couldn’t have won.
Could any suit in the kingdom match that Armor’s power?
Olivia, on the other hand, was perturbed. “I’m glad Leon is winning, but that was overboard. He should apologize to Greg later!”
Angelica shook her head, her gaze falling to her feet. “It’s best he doesn’t. He’ll just wound Greg’s pride even further.” Her gaze fell to her feet.
During the battle, Leon had claimed that he was different from the prince and his friends. Angelica assumed he was referring to how Julius and the others had shamed her in front of everyone at the party. No one had stood up for her or taken her side. But she had no way of knowing whether Leon actually realized what his comments implied.

“So…I’m weak, huh? How pathetic. I wanted…” Angelica’s voice trailed off as she stared up at the sky.
I wanted to be stronger for the prince’s sake.

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Once the arena had been cleaned up again, the next person to descend was Chris with his blue Armor. He wielded an enormous sword in both hands, with a number of other blades affixed to his back. This guy wasn’t just a swordsman; he was a Swordmaster. The kingdom bestowed that title on those who showed truly impressive swordsmanship, putting them in a class above the rest.
Chris’s father was the Sword Saint, the highest achievable rank, and ever since childhood, Chris had undergone strict training. While that training made him eternally cool and collected, he struggled to express his emotions. When he held a sword, however, he was unbeatable.
I hated him, too. Partly because his route in the game was difficult, but also because he couldn’t use anything *but* a sword. He had absolutely no long-range attacks, making him challenging to deploy. Just like the two who came before him, I’d faced numerous Game Overs as a result of Chris’s character flaws. The very memory of it brought rage seething back to the surface.
Chris lifted the enormous sword in his hands, taking a battle stance. “I won’t let my guard down like the other two. I’m going to fight with everything I have from the start.”
“Really? Then maybe I should do the same.”
“When are you going to bring out your real weapon?” Chris snapped, gesturing at my shovel. “An instrument like that has no place on the field!”
“That’s not your place to decide,” I sneered.
The referee bellowed, “Begin!”
Regardless of my grudge, Chris definitely was a strong character. Unlike his two friends before him, he didn’t seem to underestimate me, either. He showed no hesitation as he charged forward, ready to cut me down.
“Luxion, launch the drones.”
“All right. Deploying them now.”
I stepped back, keeping a fair distance as eight drones popped out of the weapons container on my back. There were sphere-shaped robots, all equipped with machine guns.
“What?!” Chris’s face contorted in surprise.
“Fire!” I pulled the trigger on the control stick, and the drones launched into their attack on the blue Armor.
Chris frantically attempted to dodge their onslaught, but he was surrounded, and he didn’t stand a chance. The rapid fire of the little robots furiously chipped away at his defenses. Chris tried to counterattack, sensing

he couldn’t win if he didn’t go on the offensive, but Luxion and the drones effortlessly outmaneuvered him.
“Resistance is futile,” Luxion said.
As soon as Chris attacked one drone, the others swooped in. He adapted swiftly, retreating behind a wall so they couldn’t circle him. A decent countermeasure. For a time.
“And checkmate. Feel like surrendering yet?” The entire time, my shovel hadn’t moved from Arroganz’s shoulder.
“How can you be satisfied with these tactics?!” Chris roared. “There’s nothing chivalrous about this!”
I was impressed with his rigid adherence to the knightly code, but frankly, I had no interest in it.
“That’s all you have to say? This isn’t a knightly sparring match. No matter how you frame it, a duel is a fight to the death. Are you telling me it’s wrong to use guns? You didn’t set any rules against it. Besides, I’m going up against five of you. Am I not the one who deserves sympathy here? Oh, I’m sorry, that’s right. I only have to take you on one at a time. I guess I can’t blame you for the lack of consideration. Really though, who do you think holds the power here? I was thinking about being nice and holding back, but if you’re jonesing for a fair-and-square duel that follows the code, I guess I’ll have to give it to you.”
Chris launched himself at me.
Luxion wasn’t about to miss the opportunity; he recalled our eight drones and they circled me as they opened fire on our opponent. Special bullets with reduced damage ensured we didn’t accidentally kill him, but this attack was so forceful that Chris had to use his enormous sword as a shield.
“Make fun of me all you like,” he shouted. “No one could enjoy a battle like this!”
“Fine with me. I only care about the results—I win, you guys lose. No one really gives a damn what method you use to get there. But don’t worry, I’ll tell everybody you did your best. I’d hate to drag your name through the mud by telling them how miserably you lost.”
“Graaaaaah!”
Bullets rained down on Chris as he boldly charged toward me, swinging his sword through the air. With his magic and the speed of his sword, he almost looked like a blade of light crashing toward me.
I lifted Arroganz’s left hand and caught Chris’s weapon, crushing it in my fist. “As impressive as I’d hoped for, Swordmaster.”
Smoke began issuing from his suit, and the referee jumped in to close the match. “Chris Fia Arclight’s Armor is unfit for battle! The victor is…Leon Fou Bartfort!”
Their voice was heavy as they declared me the winner.
From within Chris’s Armor came a trickle of sniffles.
“Why?” he cried. “Why did I lose? I’ve put in more effort than anyone else. I just wanted my hard work to be recognized…”

He'd had no choice but to work hard, given the title he had to live up to. I could sympathize with him on that, but it didn't change the situation.
"If you want to whine your miseries away, do it with your beloved girlfriend. I'm sure she'll feel sorry for you," I said.
"You really are scum."
I flinched. Unexpectedly, Luxion's words pierced my heart like a dagger. Even I realized I'd gone a bit too far.
Still, it was for the best—better they lost here and now.

***

Shock broke out everywhere in the stands.
"D-did you see that? Chris lost!"
"What the—? That was totally unfair!"
"Hey, Leon's that guy who cleared a dungeon by himself and earned a barony, right? Maybe he's actually pretty strong?"
"H-hold on a minute. Does that mean he's really going to win this thing? I bet everything I had on the prince!"
Some of the students who had been so sure of the prince's victory began to nurse doubts. At the same time, many who had made light of Leon could no longer see him the same way.
Tears welled up in Olivia's eyes. "I'm happy Leon is winning, Miss Angelica, but the way he's doing it is so cruel."
"Don't be absurd," Angelica retorted. "He might lose if he's not devoted to every countermeasure. He's taking his opponents incredibly seriously."
"R-really?"
"Chris is from an earldom that specializes in the sword. His father is the Sword Saint, the best swordsman in the country. Chris is just a step below him."
Olivia seemed genuinely impressed. "That's incredible!"
"Yes, he's quite impressive."
And yet even Chris didn't stand a chance against Leon. Jilk must be panicking.
Angelica glanced over at the prince and his group. Jilk and his Armor were nowhere to be seen. Julius was trying to reassure Marie, who had turned pale. Watching the two of them made Angelica's chest squeeze painfully.
Your Highness…

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While servants carried Chris to the medical office, Jilk threw himself into preparations for his battle, giving rapid instructions to the mechanic overseeing his Armor.
"Install every weapon you can. I want regular bullets and magical ones, too."

The mechanic's eyes went wide. "You're not supposed to use those in a match!"
"This is a *duel*!" Jilk barked. Normally, he was gentle and kind, but he was terrified. He didn't have the luxury of niceties.
Decorative wings gave his green Armor a delicate appearance, but it now also carried a massive rifle, and an ax had replaced the sword. It looked ready for war.
"Remove the adornments and attach extra plating," Jilk instructed. "Prepare some hand grenades as well."
The mechanic looked uneasy. "Lord Jilk, we're limited to the supplies we have on hand."
Jilk glanced down for a moment, then lifted his gaze, determined. "That's fine. Just give me what you can."
While the mechanic and his assistants worked, Jilk's thoughts drifted toward the battle ahead. I have to end this duel. Even if I can't win, I need to inflict enough damage to stop him. Otherwise, the prince's reputation will be at risk.
Julius was Jilk's entire reason for being. They were best friends, brothers (albeit not by blood). If they lost here, Julius's image would suffer immensely. Jilk couldn't accept that. He would do whatever he needed to make sure that didn't happen.
With that thought, he grabbed a nearby bomb, muttering, "I'll be back in a few," and slipped out of the room.

***

"Phew, I'm wiped."
We were granted a temporary break between matches, so I headed to the bathroom. As soon as I returned, Olivia and Angelica burst into the waiting room.
"Leon, where were you?!" Olivia cried.
"We were worried," Angelica added.
I tilted my head. "Huh? Why?"
They exchanged looks.
Olivia hesitated. "Oh, um, I heard someone say you looked like you weren't feeling good."
My eyes narrowed. "Me? I just need a short rest."
Angelica's brows furrowed in suspicion. "A woman claiming to be your sister arrived. Olivia recognized her. She told us you didn't look like you were doing well, so she wanted us to come visit you."
Jenna, worried about me? Suuuure. She hadn't even looked at me since I picked a fight with the prince. Why would she swing by at a time like this?
Luxion chimed in, his voice quiet enough that the two girls couldn't hear him. "Master, a bomb has been set on your Armor. Your sister planted it, acting on someone else's orders."

Of course. Most likely, she'd been threatened into it. I suppose I'd put her in an awkward position at the academy after I pissed off the prince and his crew. No doubt Jilk was taking advantage of that.
If I was scum, then Jilk was worse—a scum*bag*.
Well, Jilk will do anything for the prince. As far as he's concerned, the ends justify the means.
"The one who gave the orders is your next opponent," Luxion confirmed.
Bingo.
I let out a small sigh before turning toward the two girls, who looked anxious. "So my sister figured me out. I had to take a huge number two and I was struggling to hold it in the whole time I was out there. My stomach hurt so bad I thought I was gonna die. Honestly, I was having more trouble with my bowels than I was with my opponent."
Olivia looked utterly bewildered. "O-oh, well, I guess…I see why she was worried—I suppose she just had the wrong idea."
Angelica pinned me with a cold look. "Don't you think you could word that a little more delicately for the ladies in the room?"
"My bad. I, uh, 'had to go powder my nose in the arena's nonexistent powder room and not do anything with my butt.' Better?"
Olivia gave a strained smile.
Angelica slapped her hand to her forehead. "That isn't—no, you know what, fine. Although you really should mind your tongue, lest you embarrass yourself in a more formal setting. But I digress. It's time for you to return."
"Then let's get going," I said.
As we made our way to the arena, Luxion gave me his report. "The bomb is set on the back of Arroganz. That's a fatal weak point for the Armor of this country, so your opponent really does mean to eliminate you. Given the amount of blasting powder, I can confidently say it would immolate the pilot as well, if they were in a normal suit."
So the nicest-looking guy of the bunch is actually the scariest. That's a pretty common trope.

***

By the time I got to the arena, Jenna was nowhere to be seen. Not that I minded. I had no idea what I would even say to her after she'd agreed to hide a *bomb* on my Armor.
Angelica glanced at the green mobile suit on the other side of the arena. "Your opponent is waiting for you. It looks like one of them finally means business."
Jilk was loaded down with so much equipment it looked like he was ready to meet his death in the line of duty.
As I climbed into my Armor, Luxion reported, "This bomb appears to be triggered by a special type of magic."

The same kind of explosive had been available in the game, but I'd never used them personally.
"Types like him are the most terrifying," I said. "He's great with a gun, but he's also skilled with other weapons—a real all-rounder. No matter the situation, he can adapt to it."
While the prince and the other high lords largely excelled at melee combat, except for Brad, Jilk was proficient at long-range combat. Furthermore, in the game, his skills had the easiest learning curve. I'd relied upon him a lot—although he still pissed me off because his route was insanely difficult to complete.
As I stepped onto the field, Jilk called out to me. "You're strong. I respect that."
"Thank you."
The moment the referee called for the match to begin, Jilk turned the barrel of his rifle toward me. He flew up into the air and fired, then threw what looked like a grenade. A white shroud enveloped my surroundings.
"A smoke screen," Luxion remarked.
"He's not going easy on me."

***

Smoke swallowed the arena, and Jilk flew almost as high as he could. Too high and he would be disqualified, so he carefully stayed within the boundaries. He planned to launch an aerial attack with his rifle and hand grenades.
"Hopefully this is enough."
Jilk hadn't wanted to take the underhanded route, but he had contacted Leon's sister—through another male student, of course—and handed the bomb to her. This way, if someone did reveal the exchange, it wouldn't affect Julius's reputation. Jilk could pass it off as another student's overzealousness for the prince's sake.
A magic circle floated in front of Jilk's eyes, and through it, he saw Leon down below, searching through the smoke.
"You're too dangerous, so I'm going to get rid of you now."
People wouldn't look fondly on him for carrying this ammo—it was a special piercing type used in the army to combat enemy Armor—but his opponent had shown overwhelming power. Jilk couldn't waste time debating the morality of his tactics.
"The moment you opposed the prince, your life was forfeit. You'll meet your glorious end here!"
Jilk aimed right for Leon's head, a clear attempt to take his opponent's life. He pulled the trigger.
"What the—?!"
Leon glanced up, unscathed, as if the fired gun had been meant to get his attention. He waved leisurely.

“Tsk!” Jilk threw another grenade, then loaded more bullets into his rifle. He aimed and started to pull the trigger again—but seeing the grenade bounce harmlessly off of his opponent, Jilk played his trump card.
He activated the magic required to trigger the bomb on Leon’s Armor.
“A point-blank attack will take care of you!”
Leon disappeared. He was no longer in the arena. Yet…it didn’t look as if he’d been blown to pieces. It was like he was just…gone.
“What? Where in the world did he go?!”
A shadow passed over the sun, and Jilk sensed something wrong. There hadn’t been a single cloud in the sky. He glanced up to find Leon floating behind him.
“Heya.”
Jilk plummeted, whipping his rifle around and aiming at Leon. His finger clenched around the trigger, but something repelled the bullet. It should have pierced Leon at this distance!
“So. You actually withstood that bomb,” Jilk said.
“It was rough,” Leon admitted. “In more ways than one.”
Jilk grabbed his battle-ax and lunged, but Leon parried the attack with his shovel.
Jilk dropped his voice so the audience wouldn’t be able to hear him. “You don’t know anything.”
“Look in a mirror and say that again. You and your friends are out of your minds.”
“You really intend to face the prince in a duel? Your life as a noble will be over,” Jilk spat.
“Good! Being in the higher class makes me sick! I’d do anything to be free. Guess the two of us are similar in that way, huh?”
Any normal man would understand what Jilk was implying. Even an idiot would be desperate to negotiate after being forced to hear the consequences of his actions. Leon was the opposite. He seemed even more fired up than before.
Jilk suddenly pictured Marie’s face. She was a mysterious woman. She truly understood him, as if she were the embodiment of his ideal partner. He knew no one like her in the palace—or anywhere. With her, his heart felt at ease. In no time at all, he had become obsessed.
“I finally found the woman of my dreams!” Jilk blurted.
“Good for you. When your team loses and the prince has to stay away from her, that’ll be one less rival for you to contend with! You can play at being lovers all you like.”
Jilk managed to block Leon’s incoming strike with his rifle, but the impact sent his gun tumbling to the ground.
His power is overwhelming.
Jilk thought of the prince. Whenever they talked of Marie, the prince smiled in a way he never had before.

“What do you even know?! The prince and I both truly love her! We don’t want to *possess* her. We just want her to be happy!”
“Then why not step aside?” Leon sounded bored, but he maintained his relentless assault.
With each blow, Jilk’s Armor creaked and groaned in protest. “I don’t care what I have to do to win. I’m not going to lose to you! If you intend to harm the prince, I’ll do everything in my power to make you pay—no, not just you, your entire family!”
When Jilk first found out that he and the prince loved the same person, he’d hated himself and planned to bow out for the prince’s sake. But his love for Marie was too powerful to let him bend so easily. However, he wasn’t dueling for himself but for Julius and Marie—for them, he would do anything.
“That’s a pretty underhanded threat to use in a duel,” Leon said.
“Say whatever you want!”
Locked in aerial combat, they soared too high for anyone in the stands to hear them. Jilk felt the battle turning in his favor. He moved to renew his assault.
“I don’t care what I have to do to win. I’m not going to lose to you! If you intend to harm the prince, I’ll do everything in my power to make you pay—no, not just you, your entire family!”
Jilk’s voice—his own words—were being played back to him!
“H-how?” He’d never heard of any magic like this before! Was it rare? Or maybe it was some newly developed type of technology? Perhaps Leon had merely mimicked his voice…
But no. Somehow Leon was playing their conversation back to him.
Jilk gritted his teeth in frustration.
“You’re the one who threatened me,” Leon said. “I know, how about I deliver a copy of this to your family? I wonder what they’d think. How shameful would it be for them to discover their son threatened someone because he was about to lose? They’d be devastated! Oh, maybe I should deliver it to your precious prince and Marie instead? They’d be disgusted. You know what, better yet, let’s give it to the academy. Then we can have the whole school listen!”
Jilk composed himself. “My voice alone isn’t proof of anything.”
If Jilk knew of no magic or device that could record people’s voices, then neither did anyone else. Therefore, it would be difficult to prove this recording was legitimate. Difficult, but…
“It might not work as hard evidence, but it’ll inspire plenty of doubt,” Leon said. “Besides, if you really do follow through and try to pressure my family, everyone will grow suspicious. ‘So he really *was* behind this,’ they’ll say. You think they won’t start to suspect the prince, too, after that? Everyone’ll start thinking it. ‘The prince put him up to it.’ Your precious prince’s public image will be destroyed!”

Jilk tried to maintain a mask of calm, desperately thinking of some way to get out of this. “The prince isn’t involved. I said what I said.”
“But that’s not actually up to you to decide, now is it? People connect dots, they start to suspect who’s involved with what. Remember when Angelica was trying to talk, and you guys refused to listen? What makes you so confident the same won’t happen to you?”
Jilk gaped, at a loss for words. Leon was right; when Angelica claimed she knew nothing of Marie’s torment, Jilk and his friends hadn’t listened.
“But that was—”
“I’m tired of this. Eat dirt.” Leon’s voice was chilly as he slammed his foot down on Jilk, sending him careening toward the ground.
Upon impact, Jilk felt consciousness slipping through his fingers.
Leon’s mumbles floated through his mind: “I caused a lot of trouble for Jenna. How should I go about fixing this…?”
As if he had already lost interest in Jilk, lying in the shattered pieces of his robot.
The last thought that crossed Jilk’s mind was, Your Highness, this man is dangerous. You can’t…fight him.
Then the darkness claimed him.

Chapter 10:
Love

MARIE TREMBLED as she stared at the gray-colored Armor in the middle of the arena.

What the hell is that thing? I don't remember a character this strong being in the game. I-I don't know anything about this!

The gray Armor stood with one foot resting on the fallen mobile suit, but once it lifted its leg, officials dove in to rescue Jilk. His life wasn't in danger, but he'd lost consciousness.

Kyle seemed surprised. "Are we sure about this? Those four weren't even able to put up a fight."

Julius squeezed Marie's hands and turned toward his white robot. "We never dreamed he'd be so strong. Still, the best techniques in the kingdom were used to craft my Armor. Don't worry, Marie."

She gave him an awkward smile.

That's what everyone else said before they went out there and got the crap kicked out of them! You're all so worthless. It's because you all sucked so bad in battle that I passed the game off to my brother and told him to clear it for me in the first place.

Marie's thoughts swirled toward her previous life, a frantic bid to escape the reality playing out before her.

This is all my brother's fault! That jerk tattled to Mom about my trip, then keeled over! After that, I lost the rest of my family. Even after I got married, they wouldn't help me… Not when I wanted to have a wedding ceremony, not even when my husband ran out on me! This is all my brother's fault! And that Leon guy is just like him!

Julius peeled off his jacket, revealing the spandex-type suit clinging to his body. Normal clothing got in the way when piloting, so these suits hugged every body-line.

It looks so stupid. It was hot in the game because it made their muscles stand out, but it looks so lame in person. I wish they'd at least equip a vest and some pants like that—that brother-doppelganger creep.

Julius climbed into his Armor, and the eyes on the helmet lit up. The two eyes, which the other suits lacked, made Julius's suit resembled a robot even more.

Kyle stared at the Armor longingly. "I'm so jealous. I wish I could have one of those."

Marie shook her head. "You're not a knight, so you can't. Besides, elves can't pilot."

"I won't know for sure unless I try. Besides, I'm only half-elven, so I might have a chance."

"No," she repeated firmly. "I don't even have Armor for you to—"

She cut off as she realized something.
Wait a minute… I thought humans and demi-humans weren't supposed to be able to produce offspring together? How is he half-elven? Well, whatever, it's just a game. I doubt it has any deeper meaning.
Julius glanced down at her from his Armor. "Marie, I'm off now."
Marie struggled to find the right words. *I think what the protagonist said in this situation was…* "All right. I'll be praying for your victory, Julius."
"Thanks, I appreciate it!"
Marie often mimicked the protagonist's lines, wearing the mask of the ideal woman in front of her five love interests.
Gah, it's so exhausting. It isn't easy playing an innocent, cutesy, brainless main character all the time.
Marie had done her best since being reborn in this world to steal the protagonist's position. She laid in wait when event scenes were supposed to occur, then drove the real protagonist away. Once she was alone on the stage, she copied the protagonist's lines and demeanor to make the boys fall for her instead; a relatively simple task, since she already knew their personalities and preferences.
As a result, she made quick work of fending off Angelica as well. Or she would have, if not for a certain anomaly.
I have to do something about that background character. Wait a minute, what happens if we really do lose this duel? In the game, I'm pretty sure it would be a Game Over.
Her life was on the line here. She desperately needed Julius to win.
It can't end like this. I need to enjoy this world more. I want to fall in love with more men and live the high life. All I did in my previous life was suffer. I can't lose to that stupid background character, not when I'm finally about to obtain happiness!

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A white suit landed in the arena, sparkling in the light. Later on in the game, superior versions would be developed, but at this point, this was the strongest Armor the kingdom had to offer.
Although, you can't really call it the *strongest,* I thought. Not that I was going to say that to the prince.
"I never dreamed I would actually face you. I commend you for getting this far," Prince Julius said haughtily.
The crowd cheered him on, praying he would win. Some idiots out there had probably bet every coin they owned on his victory. Sadly, I was going to take the day. Their prayers wouldn't reach the heavens.
It gave me great pleasure.
I understood I was a weakling. I had only participated in this duel for two reasons: one was Arroganz, and the other was because the prince and friends were still first-years. They were kids now, at the very beginning of

their journey. From here on out, these five would become immensely strong, but right now, they lacked power and experience.
If I wanted to have my go at them, it had to be now.
“Hard to be proud when I just took down a bunch of small fries, you know?” I taunted, but the prince didn’t bite. He lifted his shield in his left hand and his sword in his right. On his back, two cannons with revolver-type cylinders protruded past his shoulders. It was quite the luxurious battle suit, befitting a member of the royal family.
This man was destined to be the protagonist’s partner. It felt strange standing in front of him like this, equipped for battle. It made me wonder just how sure he was that Marie was the one he should be protecting.
“Your Highness, allow me to ask you one question.”
“Go on, I’ll answer it if I can.”
“What do you think of the scholarship student—Olivia?”
The prince didn’t give me much of a reaction. In fact, he seemed confused.
“Olivia’s her name? I hear she’s a hard worker. What about her?”
“All right, then.” I lifted my shovel. It was a bit surreal to still be wielding it in battle. Maybe I *should* change it out for a sword? But I’d fought with it this far, so maybe it was best to rely on a proven tool.
As the referee stepped forward, they leveled a meaningful look at me, almost as if they were trying to say, *You know what you’re doing, right? You trying to tell me not to hurt him? I thought.*
The referee lifted their arm, then sliced a hand through the air. “Begin!”
But the prince and I stood there, motionless. He had his shield held up in front of him.
Luxion seemed dissatisfied. “He watched all our fights, and he’s still going to wait for you to make the first move? How hopeless. The power differential is clear. His Armor *does* look exceptional compared to the others, but that’s all it has going for it.”
“Then I guess it’s up to us to begin.”
I took a step forward, slamming my shovel into his shield. The prince deflected my attack and slashed at me with the sword in his right hand. I caught it with the handle of my shovel, and sparks flew as metal screamed.
“I’ve got more where that came from!” the prince cried. He launched consecutive attacks with his shield and sword.
I parried and backstepped. Passionate cheers rang out from the crowd, who seemed to think the prince had overpowered me.
“They really don’t want to lose the bet, do they?” I huffed.
“I imagine they’re excited at the prospect of not having to listen to your gloating anymore, as well. You’ve been so in love with lecturing your opponents every round, after all. Perhaps the audience finds you annoying ‘as hell,’ as you like to put it?” Luxion suggested.
“Not helping!” I snapped. “Whoops!”
I dodged an angry blow from the prince just in time, sliding across the ground to slip away.

The prince moved nimbly, seeming to skate across the ground as he flew toward me, his sword raised. I caught the attack with my shovel.
“I’m not going to lose. I *can’t* lose! Not when she’s praying for my victory!”
The light from his blade shone brighter, reacting to his emotions. Blue flames shot out from behind him as he pressed his assault, making his Armor even more impressive.
“I will admit, it’s artistic,” Luxion said.
“Coming from you, that’s not a compliment,” I said dryly. “And anyway, we can’t back down.”
I blocked each blow of his sword. It was obvious that, as a pilot, he had more skills at his disposal than I did.
“Impressive, Your Highness. You’re far fiercer than your four buddies. Or maybe they held back because they were secretly hoping I’d win—couldn’t help thinking about how much easier it would be for them with you gone. One less person around and they’d each have more time to spend with Marie!”
“Enough of your nonsense! You don’t know anything about us!” The blue flames burned even stronger as he pressed on. The prince forced his armor over capacity in hopes of overcoming the enormous gap in power between us.
Goes to show how serious he is about this.
“You’re right. I don’t know anything, but I don’t think things can go on like this, either.”
I glanced over at Olivia and Angelica in the stands, watching me. Olivia clasped her hands in prayer as she cheered me on, and Angelica wore a tormented look. She probably hated seeing the two of us fight. Or perhaps she feared I might actually hurt him?
“Tell me, Your Highness,” I continued, still fighting off his attack, “what’s it like to truly love someone? I have no idea, so you’ll have to explain it to me.”
“I’m sure you don’t. Neither of you do. That’s why she had no trouble getting in my way. If she had ever experienced love before, she’d never have instigated this duel! If she truly loved me, she’d have bowed out gracefully!”
Not that I had any business saying this, but couldn’t the same be said for the prince?
“Are you talking about Miss Angelica?” I asked. “Uh, I’m pretty sure she *does* love you.”
“She doesn’t.”
“Huh?”
The flames on his back burned ferociously as he increased his speed. His movements were swifter than anyone else’s had been, and his blows were sharper as well.
“What she feels can’t be called love! She never tried to understand how I felt. She was no different than the other girls at the palace! She just forced

me to carry out my role as a prince—but I never wanted to be born into the royal family. No one at the palace even cared about me as a person!”
Of course they didn’t. He was the crown prince—the heir to the kingdom. I could tell him as much, but Prince Julius genuinely didn’t seem to like the role he’d been born into.
“Marie was the only woman who realized how I truly felt,” he continued.
So Marie conned him into liking her just by acting differently. In the game, the prince fell for sweet, genuine, common-born Olivia. Thanks to the woman who had reincarnated into this world, however, everything had gone awry. Selfish, noble-born Marie was leading all five of those bastards around by the nose, and they embarrassed themselves every second they tripped after her.
“You act so cocky, but you’re just like them,” the prince spat. “Your words are cheap. The only reason you have such a big head is because you got your hands on a powerful Armor. You can’t even be called a knight! Is this really that fun for you? Tell me, how does it feel to abuse your power and trample over other people? How does it feel to look down at others like they’re less than you?!”
“Absolutely amazing!” I crowed.
“What?!”
I lifted my leg, intending to slam my foot into him, but he blocked me with his shield. The momentum sent him reeling backward, but he launched his shoulder cannons at me. I didn’t even bother blocking. The blasts weren’t enough to make Arroganz flinch, much less leave a scratch.
“It feels absolutely amazing!” I cackled. “After how you and your friends threw your weight around and tried to intimidate me with your authority, it’s so damn cathartic pounding you into the ground and telling you what I really think. I admit, I do find it pretty sad your friends had nothing to say in their defense. Although, they would have looked pretty pathetic going off at the mouth after they lost so terribly.
“Let me tell you one more thing while I’m at it,” I went on. “I may be as arrogant as you say, but you still can’t beat me. How does that feel, hmm? How does it feel to have someone *you* looked down on beat you, *Your Highness*?!”
“You bastaaaard!”
I could get addicted to pounding my opponents into the ground as I tell them off.
These guys had acted so condescending toward me. I felt no remorse.

“Since he can’t even beat someone like you in an argument, it’s over for him.” It was a good thing Luxion’s voice (as well as our conversations) couldn’t be heard outside the cockpit. “He’s probably shocked speechless that he’s about to lose. Also, Master, you really are a garbage human being. I’m impressed.”
The prince swung his left arm up, bashing his shield into me. Smoke poured from the hand of his suit, as if he’d pushed it past its limits. The shield itself was so badly warped that His Highness chucked it to the side. Several of its fingers bent at odd angles. He wouldn’t be able to use that hand anymore.
“Oh,” I said, almost as an afterthought, “one more thing. I don’t give a crap how you feel, you idiot! How could I even begin to understand? You never even tried to understand how Miss Angelica fe—”
“Shut uuuup!”
He swung at me and I raised my shovel, locking our weapons together. The heads of our Armors collided, but I had the advantage of weight and size.
“What’s with all the whining about being royalty? Has anyone tried to sell you to a perverted old hag? Ever had to bow your head repeatedly and beg someone to marry you? Ever had someone tell you how much they hate countryfolk or how they expect you to finance their lover, too? It’s pathetic! Why don’t you try waiting on a wife hand and foot while she turns around and loves every man but you?!”
I was sure numerous men in the audience agreed with how I felt. Some nodded their heads or wiped tears away.
Don’t worry, everyone… I’m going to deliver divine punishment to this ignorant rich boy. Just watch!
“And? So what?!” Prince Julius yelled. “At least you’re free! All you have to do is find a good partner!”
His response pissed me off so much I punched him a couple more times. With each blow, he groaned as he tried to withstand the shockwaves sent through the Armor.
“Free?! I ‘just have to find a good partner’?!” I wanted to laugh. “You think I —you think *we* are really free?! You rich, pampered little brat, don’t you dare mock us! You try fearing for your chastity! Try putting your life on the line on a tiny boat in the sky! You had a gorgeous fiancée willing to forgive your trysts with other women. What the hell kind of nonsense is this whole ‘I didn’t ask for this’ crap? You’re living the damn high life! Do you have a single better excuse?!”
“I’m not playing around!”
“That makes it even worse!” I snarled.
Marie was the daughter of a viscount. He could have welcomed her as a concubine or maybe even a lover.
Uh, I mean, probably, right? I don’t really know how all that stuff works, but none of his reasons excuse ignoring Angelica the way he did!

Besides, this guy was supposed to lead our kingdom in the future! His friends were supposed to inherit their fathers' titles and be powerful lords, too. Having them all fawning over the same woman would cause nothing but problems.

I swung my shovel with all my might, knocking the sword from his hand, then I grabbed both of his arms and crushed them until they hung limp at his side.

The prince leaped back to and fired his cannons. I dodged each blast, waiting for his ammo to run out. He had a limited number of shots, so it wouldn't take long, but…

"Hah… Enough of this! Playtime is over. The person you should be talking to is over there, you hear me?" I pointed my thumb back at the stands where Angelica and Olivia stood.

Angelica watched us with such sadness in her eyes. She leaned forward, as if waiting for the prince to say something to her. She cared about him. No, she *loved* him. The whole point of this duel was to pull Marie away from him, after all.

Even though he couldn't fight anymore, the prince still said, "Not yet."

"What?"

"It's not over yet. If it means losing Marie, I'd rather die! I won't accept defeat no matter what happens. If you're going to kill me, then do it! This is a duel! I forbid anyone from ending this until one of us is dead!"

Not going to let anyone else interfere, huh?

Defiant little jerk. He whined about how he didn't want to be a member of the royal family, but he was perfectly willing to wield his authority to order everyone around. What a ridiculous hypocrite. He'd point the finger if he saw someone else contradicting themselves like that, but he was perfectly willing to contradict himself.

He was a real pain.

"Fine, guess I'll keep going until I break you," I muttered.

"That chat could have gone better," Luxion said. "Though, I did detect more emotion from you just then than I have from anything else you've said. I commend you for that at least."

Of course! I was speaking from actual experience. I wasn't just venting at the prince for the sake of it.

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Both of the arms on Julius's white mobile suit were broken, but he still tried to throw punches at Leon.

To Angelica, the prince's desperation was plain. Leon far outmatched him, yet His Highness wouldn't back down. She clutched the handrail, tears trailing down her cheeks.

“You really are serious about her, aren’t you, Your Highness? You really do love her.” At last, she relinquished the possibility that her feelings would ever reach him and wiped her tears away.

That’s right. I should back down. If this is truly what he wants, then it’s what I ought to do.

Her gaze traveled to the opposite side of the stadium. Marie stood there, pale as a sheet. Angelica glared at her.

But I still won’t accept you. Whoever he picks, it mustn’t be you at his side. You’ll only get in his way. I won’t allow it.

Even though she was prepared to give up on being with the prince herself, Angelica still intended to rip the two of them apart. It was in the prince’s best interest. She couldn’t let a woman who had a lover and maintained romantic relationships with four other men sit on the throne as queen. In such a short amount of time, that siren had managed to ensnare all five of them. Angelica had no doubt she would continue to lure in even more men after this.

If a woman like Marie became queen, the potential for war would increase dramatically. The palace couldn’t sit quietly and watch that happen.

Marie’s complexion continued to pale as Julius’s Armor fell apart in front of her eyes.

Angelica regarded her panic with a scowl. I don’t care what happens to me, as long as I drag you down with me. I won’t let you have your way with the prince.

Though her heart ached at the thought of tearing the prince away from someone he claimed to love, Angelica would do whatever was necessary to keep them apart.

“You’re wrong, Prince Julius!” Olivia suddenly shouted from beside Angelica. “Maybe you love Marie, but Miss Angelica loves you! She’s been tormented this whole time watching your duel, but she still hasn’t turned away! Please don’t say she doesn’t love you!”

Flustered, Angelica tried to cut her off, “H-hey, that’s enough.”

She reached for Olivia’s shoulders and tried to pull her back, but Olivia was all worked up.

Olivia’s voice echoed through the arena, charismatic and arresting. The whole audience, teachers and students alike, turned to look at her. “Why do you deny her feelings like that? Are you going to say it’s not love if it’s not mutual?”

“Enough, just leave it,” Angelica snapped. “Olivia, I said stop!”

“No, I have to speak,” Olivia insisted. “What Miss Angelica feels is love, Prince Julius! It’s up to you whether you want to accept her feelings or not, but please don’t deny them!”

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Those words were so loud even Marie heard them at the other end of the stadium.

Pisses me off, Goody Two-Shoes like her. Are you a complete bonehead? You can't call one-sided feelings love! She really makes me want to throw things.

But Olivia's words, ringing through the arena, seemed to resonate with the crowd. Marie's face contorted with disgust. Was Olivia rubbing it in Marie's face that she wasn't the real heroine of this story? After all, Olivia was the one these gorgeous, rich, and powerful men were supposed to be pining after. And despite everything Marie had done to steal her place as the protagonist, Olivia inevitably drew attention with her sheer charisma.

So what? She's only still here because she got a strong background character to back her up. I have all the love interests. They're obviously way more valuable than that sad excuse for comic relief. His only redeeming quality is the absurd power he got his hands on.

But then, suddenly, Olivia stared straight at Marie…a terrifying look in her eyes. It was like she could see straight through the mask Marie had so painstakingly crafted. Like Olivia was threatening to take back everything Marie had stolen.

Marie staggered back a step.

"Is that all you have to say, woman?" Julius's voice sounded strained. His words, laced with fury, were stifled as they trickled from his beat-up Armor. "You think you can call it love when you force your feelings on someone who doesn't return them? Angelica only saw me as a crown prince, and you think *that* is love? I found a woman who truly sees me for who I am, who understands me. *That* is true love! Angelica, did you ever try to understand me? Don't come near me ever again!"

His words rallied Marie's spirits.

That's right. I'm not wrong to feel the way I do. They're the ones in the wrong. What's the protagonist even doing aligning herself with the villainess like that? In the game, the two of them were at each other's throats. Hurry up and fight each other already!

"Now," Julius said, gasping, "let's resume our duel. I mean it. This won't end until one of us is dead. I'm prepared to accept the outcome now, no matter what it is. What about you?"

The gray Armor just stood there, its shovel resting on its shoulder.

Julius is the crown prince. If you really are a noble, take the hint already. Do you want to kill your own kingdom's future monarch? Hurry up and accept defeat!

"So you're prepared *now*?" Leon bit back. "That mean you weren't prepared before? Now that you're afraid you're going to lose you've finally found some goddamn resolve? You *mocking* me? A duel is the very definition of a death match! The only reason you five dirtbags are alive is because of the academy's rule against killing people in the ring. Otherwise, you'd be done for. Didn't you realize that?"

Leon laughed, a mocking sound. “Man, I should’ve taken all five of you at once. It would’ve been so much quicker. I had my guard up because you were all so confident, but you’re far weaker than I imagined. Give me a break! Now I look like some kind of big bad bully.”
What the heck is his problem? He’s just like my older brother—incessantly pointing out every little flaw and attacking the other person’s character. I hate people like him!
“Now that your Armor is falling to pieces and you’re about to lose everything, you’ve finally prepared yourself for the worst case scenario, huh?” Leon went on. “I gotta give it to you, you’re persistent—trying to use your life as a shield to claim victory. Obviously you’re hoping that’ll convince me to back down and surrender. How disappointing. Even I can’t kill a prince. Maybe I should admit defeat, then? Then good news for you. You get to win because you’re a prince. You went on and on about how you didn’t want to be born into the royal family, but you’re willing to use the full extent of the privilege it entails just to snatch victory. I commend you for that!”
Everyone in the arena had to be thinking the same thing: *This guy is a total asshole.*
“Go on, say it,” Leon said for all to hear. “‘Please lose for me, Leon. I don’t want to be separated from my beloved Marie, so please let me win! I’m begging you! I never thought I’d *actually* lose.’ Come on, beg me to surrender. Beg me to forgive you for your arrogance. Oh wait, you’re a prince. Why not order me instead?”
“I’d never do that!” Julius shouted. “This is a sacred duel. Proper etiquette dictates that we must fight each other with our full strength!”
“Hmm? So you’re telling me to be considerate and surrender without even being asked? You’re a tough one, Your Highness. I’d be violating the sanctity of the duel if I admitted defeat just to avoid killing you. But it doesn’t seem like you stand a chance of turning the tables and beating me, either. Or do you have some moving speech prepared that will convince me otherwise? Nah, I’ve listened to all five of you talk by now, and everything I’ve heard sounds like bull. If anything, I’m impressed you’re able to spew such *ridiculous* drivel.”
The atmosphere in the arena simmered with discomfort as Leon continued to egg on the prince. The women in the crowd, and even some of the men, screamed, “Prince Julius, finish him off!”
He really is disgusting, Marie thought. I guess scumbags like that exist no matter what world you live in.

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I let out a small sigh sitting inside Arroganz.

“I’m impressed you managed to say all that.” Luxion seemed intent on driving home how big of a sleazeball I was. “Do you feel the human feeling of elation?”
“I know, I said too much. I just need those five to have a *little* more self-awareness. These guys are going to be the driving force of our kingdom in the future.”
It wouldn’t bode well for me (or the country, for that matter) if they stayed the way they were right now. I needed them to at least understand that no matter how impressive they thought they were, there was always someone better out there. They also needed to calm the hell down. How could a single woman wind all five of them around her creepy little monkey finger? Ridiculous.
“So you’re simply playing the villain?” Luxion sounded skeptical. “You seem to really be enjoying yourself.”
“Well, okay, yes. I’m having a ton of fun. Not like I’m ever going to get to do this again.”
I let the prince’s supporters shower me with insults as I stepped toward the prince. I didn’t mind. I stopped him as he tried to swing his broken fists at me.
“Prince Julius, I’m not going to withdraw.”
“Let go of me! Let goooo! You’re a lowlife, a slime without an ounce of chivalry! Even if I can’t beat you, I have no intention to surrender!”
He wriggled in my Armor’s grasp, but Arroganz easily held him in place. I sure was glad for my power advantage.
“Let’s be serious for a moment,” I said. “Do you really think you’ll be happy the way things are right now?”
“Wh-what are you trying to say?!”
He’d humiliated his (now former) fiancée and wanted to claim true love for a woman who was toying with a bunch of other men. This man was our future king? Come on! Everyone else at the academy was so drunk on the drama that they weren’t looking at reality. Maybe they were trying to avoid it.
Marie was bound to trigger issues in the future. With five men around her, how could you know the father of any child she bore? Someone would inevitably doubt the baby’s parentage, and some would leverage that doubt for political ends. What would the prince do then? Would he suddenly wake up to reality and take another woman as his partner for the express purpose of producing an heir?
There was a more immediate problem, too: while Julius might be a prince, he needed support for his authority to mean anything. Namely, he needed support from cabinet ministers and nobility—regional lords. If no one recognized his power, he’d be politically impotent. Kings struggled enough to keep balance between political factions without carelessly making it worse.

One of Prince Julius's biggest supporters was Duke Redgrave. Angelica's father.

And this idiot just made an enemy of him.

In the game, Julius hooked up with the protagonist, who then became a saint. But Marie was no saint—she was nothing more than some girl reincarnated from a different world, i.e., she was meant to be a background character like me. At some point, she would screw up, and royally. Frankly, she already had. I was just cleaning up her mess.

I almost want ask her if she's my stupid little sister.

"Love?" I said to Julius. "That's wonderful. I understand you're passionate. So much so, you must be willing to throw away your claim to the throne to be with her."

"Guh…!"

Prince Julius wasn't stupid. He had to understand all this… Ah. Of course. He picked Marie despite knowing what it would mean for his future.

Wait. Isn't that worse than if he'd just been an idiot?

My eyes narrowed. "I guess that means I was right. You really do plan to abdicate, don't you?"

"Going to laugh and call me a fool? That's just how valuable she is to me! I don't need status. As long as she's by my side, that's enough."

"I'm pretty sure that's exactly why she wanted you, though. I doubt she'd even look your way if you weren't the crown prince."

Marie would want nothing to do with him if the prince lost everything—his status, his prestige, his fortune. Oh, she'd be fine dating him because he was good-looking, but she wouldn't entertain the idea of marrying him anymore.

"That's not true at all!" Prince Julius cried. "Marie will stay with me no matter what. All I need is her!"

What a terrifying woman, to make a man like him say that.

Had she really charmed him so by simply copying the main character's lines? Marie had to have some talent of her own to pull that off. Not that I believed for a second that she truly loved the prince. If she did possess any love, she wouldn't be toying with five men.

"Good for you. But you're going to lose, so you'll have to give up on dating her anyway."

I released him and swung my shovel as hard as I could. The prince's white suit crumpled under the blow, and his robot sank to the ground.

"Analysis complete," Luxion reported. "I can guarantee the safety of the pilot."

"Holding back sure is difficult. Anyway, it's over now."

I dropped my shovel and pressed the palm of my right hand against the prince's suit's chest. The armored plating around my arm began to expand, emitting a white light.

"Impact," Luxion said, and the prince's mobile suit fractured into dust.

Shrieks erupted from the stands, but as the dust cleared, the prince's untouched body appeared in the rubble. I scooped up my shovel and rested it against my shoulder.
The arena fell silent.
I turned my gaze to the referee, who was calling for a doctor before they bothered announcing the winner. Of course, they prioritized Prince Julius's safety.
Once they realized he'd merely fainted, the referee sagged in relief and shouted, "The victor is Leon Fou Bartfort! Therefore, the winner of this duel is Angelica Rapha Redgrave. In accordance with the agreed upon terms…"
They proceeded to command the losing side to adhere to the promise they'd made and called an end to the duel.
Blue notes, representing bets on the prince's victory, began fluttering through the arena, the crowd hurling abuse at me.
"Give us back our money!"
"What a sham! You can't even call this a duel!"
"Return it! Return our money!"
I basked in the pleasant cacophony. I lifted my shovel and floated up through the air, recording the faces of all the people in the crowd. They looked absolutely devastated, but a few among them had red notes safely tucked in their pockets—proof they'd bet on my victory.
"Careful what you gamble on!" I said, taunting the losers.
Soon they were slinging garbage at me. I cackled as I dodged out of the way, floating back down to where Olivia stood. When I disembarked from Arroganz, my Armor automatically slipped back into its storage and flew up into the sky.
"You'll make sure to pick it up, right?" I asked Luxion.
"Obviously."
I accepted the jacket Olivia held out for me and slipped my arms through the sleeves. "How was it, ladies? I won."
Angelica looked conflicted. Little surprise there. It was her beloved prince I'd beaten to a pulp. It was only natural for her to feel torn.
"Yes. I suppose I should thank you," she said, not looking grateful in the least. Her face was pallid, and she seemed concerned about the prince's condition.
I decided it was best not to joke. Solemnly, I said, "I didn't hurt him, I promise. He's just unconscious."
And anyway, if anything had happened to him, it was all Luxion's fault. Not mine.
Olivia looked similarly conflicted. She seemed more conscious of our surroundings than anything else, sensing the danger from the other students. "Uh, um, are you sure this was really for the best? The looks they're giving us…"
Most were glaring daggers at me. Some hurled insults, others sobbed.
"What am I supposed to do now?! That was all the money I had!"

“Please, I’m begging you, give my money back! I’m in debt now. I borrowed money so I could bet!”
“The stakes were rigged. We can’t accept this!”
Too ignorant of the world, these noble kids. I’d fed them a nice, bitter pill. Only an idiot would gamble without knowing whether the odds were in their favor or not.
Although these fools bet because they were positive I was going to lose… Well, whatever. I beat all five of those jerks, so I won. That’s all there is to it.
“Leave them be,” I said aloud. “If they lost their entire fortune, that’s on them. They can consider it my class fee for teaching them a valuable lesson: don’t gamble.”
Angelica heaved a sigh. “Easy for you to say. You knew you were going to win… That’s why you bet so much money on yourself, right? Still, you came through for me. Thank you. We can discuss your reward later. For now, I’m going to see the prince.”
She hurried off, and Olivia and I started toward the changing room.
Olivia’s voice was thick with concern as she asked, “Leon, why did you say so many harsh things to them? Wouldn’t it have been better to stay quiet?”
Evidently she thought I could have handled things better. Perhaps she was rather disillusioned with me. So then…why was she so nice to me? I couldn’t remember doing anything to warrant such treatment. Was the protagonist just that compassionate, that kindhearted? Or was I simply her only real friend at the academy?
“I wanted their hostility centered on me,” I said. “It went exactly as I planned.”
Her brows drew together, puzzled. “Really? But, um, won’t this make it harder for you to find a partner in the future? They’re all very angry with you.”
“Yeah, nothing to worry about. I’m sure I’ll be expelled anyway.”
“Huh?” she blurted, and her jaw dropped.
Man, it must be nice to be such a natural beauty. Even with that dumbfounded look on her face, she’s still cute.

***

Only Angelica and Julius were in the medical office. He had only been briefly knocked unconscious and had no other injuries, so the nurses and doctor read the air in the room and gave the two some space.
Angelica cried at the sight of him. He sat in his bed, head hung limp as he absorbed the results of the duel. She could tell he still hadn’t accepted the outcome.
“I’m really glad you’re all right,” she said.

His eyes were devoid of all emotion as he looked at her. “You can quit the charade. It was your representative in the duel that drove me into a corner.”
Angelica fell silent. Of course he blamed her for the way things turned out.
“Your Highness,” she said finally, “allow me to ask you…why wasn’t I enough? I…I worked so hard up until now for your sake.”
She’d poured everything she had into becoming a woman worthy of the crown prince. She was proud of all the work she’d put in. Back home, she’d undergone strict training from dawn until dusk, knowing one day she would be queen: etiquette courses, lessons on culture, fine arts, and politics. She had devoted herself to being the perfect fiancée.
It infuriated her to see Marie get so close to the prince when she hadn’t put in any effort at all. Angelica had sacrificed so much for so long, dedicating herself to the role from the time she was a child. Then Marie appeared out of nowhere, and the prince shoved Angelica aside.
Julius chucked dryly. “For *my* sake? You wanted me for my position as the crown prince.”
“You’re wrong! I did it for *you*, Prince Julius!”
“No, *you’re* wrong. You never really looked at *me*, and I can prove it. Do you know what my favorite food is?”
“Yes, of course! It’s a soup,” she said, going on to explain the specifics of the dish, but he merely frowned.
“That’s not my favorite.”
Angelica was taken aback. “Huh?”
“My favorite food is a skewer I ate when I sneaked out of the palace. You told me such food was for commoners and didn’t suit me, so I never mentioned it to you. I figured you would dismiss me if I tried.”
He didn’t feel like he could be honest with her! Angelica wiped at her tears.
“I would never! If you’d told me—”
“Marie realized without me even having to say anything. She recognized it the first time we went out together, and she invited me to a food stand.”
Angelica’s tears fell faster, dripping from her chin to the floor. So she realized things that I never had? Even though I’ve been by his side for so long?
Julius wore a guilty look, but he didn’t apologize. “I know I’ve disrespected you and your family, but I can’t love any other woman but Marie.”
Angelica sobbed. “I don’t mind. As long as you’ll let me stay beside you, Your Hi—Julius.”
He shook his head. “I can’t love you.”
So that was how he really felt. Angelica had to concede defeat and bow out.
She turned her back to leave. “Your Highness, I’m sorry for how things turned out. I won’t say anything more to you. Only…I’ll be praying for your happiness from a distance.”
As she left the room, she wondered if she imagined his response: “It’s a little late for that now. I wanted you to say that to me sooner.”

Chapter 11:
The Fools

NO MATTER WHAT WORLD you lived in, some men fell from grace all for the love of a woman. In this otome game world, those men were the prince and his companions. They were supposed to fall for the protagonist—the kingdom's future Saint. Their affairs would progress gradually, gently encouraging everyone to accept the union so they could marry without conflict.

But some idiot decided to rush things along, losing sight of the whole "it's the journey, not the destination" part of the equation.

The reason this romantic crap all worked in the game was because the protagonist was, you know, *Olivia*. It wouldn't go so smoothly for her fake; their situations differed. Things might have actually gone better for Marie if she'd just been a little more honest in her pursuit of the love interests.

Phew, that was pretty deep for a game with such a flimsy story.

I took advantage of summer break to visit Angelica's house—the house of Duke Vince Rapha Redgrave, an influential man with slicked-back ashen hair. He was middle-aged, tall, and muscular, with viciously sharp eyes. Standing beside him at his desk was Angelica's older brother—Gilbert Rapha Redgrave. He had blond hair and blue eyes and was still in his early twenties, but his face was an exact replica of his father's.

Both of them glared at me.

"I understand the circumstances," the duke said. "So you're asking me to clean up after you?"

I adjusted my posture and nodded, ready to plead my case. "I have no contacts within the palace. I can't do anything on my own, but I have prepared platinum to fund my request."

I'd earned a small mountain of the stuff gambling on the duel. I'd collected it all to offer the duke.

"Please protect me," I went on. "As you can see, I have money!"

Pathetic? Hey, if I could buy my way out of getting executed, hell yeah I was going to do it.

Gilbert opened his mouth to speak, but the duke held up a hand to silence him.

"I admit it's impressive that an upstart baron like yourself could gather this much. Manipulating political sentiment in the palace does require funds, and you did stand in as a proxy for my daughter in the duel. I'll look after you this time, but I can't protect you from every little issue that comes your way. You aren't my vassal; you aren't even an ally within our political faction. You may have humored my daughter's recklessness, but that also means you stuck your nose in of your own accord."

Nonetheless, I inwardly pumped my fists. I was just a student, I'd avoided real danger, and now things were headed back in a positive direction. My life was only getting started!

"Yes, I understand. I merely desire clemency and for my family to be spared any repercussions on my account."

The duke folded his hands on his desk. "You already lost all claim to honor. You're ready to lose your status as well?"

While I might be forgiven for beating my opponents, I had also disparaged them until their spirits broke. Our duel had been far from honorable.

"I'll return the knighthood and the baron title," I promised. "Not that I've formally received either yet, but I recognize I have no right to accept them now."

I was handing over an enormous sum of money, my status, and my title in hopes the kingdom would forget any of this had ever happened. It was a small price to pay considering I'd challenged the crown prince to a duel. On the bright side, in the process, I could also weasel my way out of having to search for a marriage partner.

Gilbert peered at me and said, "What are you really after? If you have so much power, you could have ignored this duel and focused on making a name for yourself. In one generation, you could have achieved viscount status if you so desired. Why are you so willing to throw it all away now?"

For one thing, I'd really, really wanted to punch those love interests in the face. I also wanted to escape the hell of searching for a marriage partner. I had a ton of reasons…but I couldn't divulge any of them. I came up with an excuse on the spot.

"I couldn't just stand by and watch as that woman deceived the prince. I guess you could say it was for the sake of the kingdom. Someone had to do it."

Duke Redgrave chuckled heartily. "That is, in fact, *quite* honorable, assuming you speak the truth. If the prince was merely having a tryst, that would be one thing. If he's serious, it's trouble for the rest of us. The palace and esteemed high lords are in an uproar, in fact. Furthermore, Redgrave House has officially annulled the engagement between Angelica and the prince. He didn't deserve my daughter. Wouldn't you agree?"

Oh boy. He was testing me.

I didn't necessarily want to impress the man. I was satisfied as long as my life was safe and I could be released from my obligations as a noble, like finding a noble partner. Beating the crap out of those five had been a nice distraction, though.

Ah, everything I wished for is right within my grasp.

"I have no comment regarding your daughter and the prince. Though personally, I do hope he learns a little bit during his time at the academy, so that he can become a king we'll all be proud of in the future."

The duke stroked his chin. "Very well. On a different note, I have a request for you."

“What is it?”
“It’s about my daughter. This incident did a number on her. I can’t stand by and watch her mope. I’d hoped to send her to a decent place in the countryside where she could recuperate, but with our current circumstances, we’re too busy to set that up.”
The duke’s vassals and allies were preoccupied with attending to the aftershocks of the duel. Angelica’s followers had turned on her; in the next few days, their parents and guardians would be coming to apologize. Their children’s betrayal of Angelica, and by extension Redgrave House, had put them in a tight spot. The duke would be busy with them all summer and likely wanted to send Angelica somewhere she wouldn’t have to deal with any of it.
“Your house would work perfectly. Take her with you when you leave. I’ll send several attendants along to see to her daily needs,” the duke said.
“Oh, uh…certainly!”
He was leaving his daughter with me? Was that really okay?
Skeptical as I was, no way was I stupid enough to put my hands on a duke’s daughter. It would be terrifying if he even suspected I was entertaining the idea. I decided to play it cool. This was just a trip! He could leave everything to me!
“I appreciate it,” he said. “Now, you may leave.”
“Yes, please excuse me.”
Once I was out of the duke’s office, I breathed a sigh of relief.
My days at the academy were coming to an end. I felt incredible. If I had any lingering regrets, it was the fact that I wouldn’t learn more about the art of tea from my master. He’d already angrily lectured me about the barbarity of my duel, but he’d still let me drink his delicious brews.
“That’s really the only thing that’ll bother me,” I murmured to myself.
There were a few other minor things, perhaps. Daniel and Raymond were on my mind. And I wondered how Lucle was doing. And I wished I could have tried all the popular desserts at the school cafeteria.
Crap. The more I thought about it, maybe I actually had enjoyed my time at the academy.

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After Leon left, Gilbert looked to his father. “What do you think?”
The duke laughed. “It’s as you said. If he really were a clever boy only thinking of himself, he would have kept quiet and just watched from the sidelines. After all, that’s how children are.”
The two gazed at the mountain of platinum coins Leon had left.
“He sure provided a hefty sum,” Gilbert said.
“He wanted to admonish the prince so badly he was willing to throw away his status and honor. Impressive resolve. In comparison, that bootlicker Jilk was a disappointment. He’s the one who should have been scolding the

prince for his behavior. Alas, that academy has as many problems now as it had in the past. Too many children laze about, ignorant of the outside world."

The academy environs were unique. For the purpose of educating the next generation of nobles, the rules were designed to give the impression that everyone ought to be treated fairly. That was impossible, of course—reality inevitably seeped in—but the academy's atmosphere encouraged the students to ignore how the outside world perceived them. Incidents like the duel between Angelica and Marie broke out because students became too preoccupied with their reputation within that closed community.

The issue this time had caused quite the uproar, but as students returned home for summer break, they'd be forced to wake up to reality. Angelica's followers in particular were going to learn what it meant to pick a fight with the daughter of a duke—and consequently, her entire house.

"Though," Gilbert spoke up again, "I do think there were other ways he could have handled it."

"You think so? The way he did was delightful. True, Angie was foolish for challenging them to a duel as she did, but for that boy to volunteer when no one else would step up to help her is impressive. That's how a knight *should* be. On the surface, at least."

"Just what are you planning?"

His father grinned. "He's my daughter's savior. I'll clean up his mess. I'd like another knight for you to rely on in the future, and Redgrave House could use the extra security. Thanks to this mess, we've already identified several allies we can no longer trust."

The two gazed through a nearby window. An airship, over seven hundred meters long, floated right outside. Gilbert had found the vessel curious at first, since its design was like nothing he had ever seen before. He'd been impressed to learn it was a Lost Item Leon had recovered from a dungeon. Adventurers were revered in Holfort Kingdom. Thousands of men aspired to accomplish what Leon already had.

"A man strong enough to beat a group of esteemed nobility is impressive indeed, but how deeply do you intend to pull him into our ranks?" Gilbert asked. "Should we prepare a partner for him from one of our allies' houses?"

The duke rested a hand on his chin. "Not a bad idea, but a bit tepid. Any man clever or informed enough will be desperate to claim him. Regardless, we'll have to start by fixing this little mess. I'll be leaving for the palace. Look after our lands while I'm gone."

And he stood from his chair, clearly ready to throw himself into the political torrents at court.

***

The fully outfitted, cylindrical ship Luxion had created was called *Paltner*. It was managed by several robots Luxion had recovered from the ones I'd destroyed in my quest to retrieve him. Even the round, defensive-type robots with no legs were hard at work.

The wind felt good as I stepped out onto *Paltner*'s deck. Luxion floated beside me in his compact, ball-shaped body.

"You're not going to go see them?" he asked.

He was referring to Olivia and Angelica, both of whom were accompanying me for summer break. There were others on board as well—servants to look after Angelica, who was still quite heartbroken.

"And what should I say to them? If someone expects me to cough up compassionate crap, they're in for some disappointment."

"No one expects anything from you, I promise."

I stared at him. "Do you hate me?"

"No, I don't hate you. But I don't like you, either."

If he weren't so capable, I'd be tempted to snatch him out of the air and fling him overboard. I sighed. "To tell the truth, I don't know what to say to Angelica. She just had her engagement annulled. To make things worse, it didn't go that well for her when she went to talk to the prince."

She had spoken privately with His Highness, but it had been to no avail. Due to the outcome of the duel, the prince and Marie were no longer in a relationship. Still, people did say that the more obstacles lovers faced, the brighter their love burned. Sure enough, His Highness declared he would continue loving Marie regardless and pray for her happiness.

He also said some weird stuff about preserving his chastity. I wondered if he really was as chaste as he claimed. Wait, no, I didn't. I did *not* want to know anything about whether some dude had done it before or not.

Hold on, wasn't that a problem, though? He was our crown prince. The kingdom would be in trouble if he didn't produce an heir, and in the game, the only prince that ever appeared was Julius. There was going to be a succession problem if he didn't have a kid!

"No—nope. I'm *not* getting involved," I decided. "Nothing I say is going to solve the problem anyway."

"You truly are a refreshingly horrible excuse for a human being."

***

The two girls sat together inside a private room on the ship. Olivia was concerned that Angelica seemed to have lost weight due to her heartbreak, and had opted to accompany her over summer break.

"It's almost laughable," Angelica was saying. "None of my feelings seemed to reach him. I managed to push him and Marie apart and yet I still lost. I really must be a fool. I'm a total failure as a woman."

"You weren't wrong for doing what you did, Miss Angelica."

“I guess.” Angelica shrugged. “Except I lost so wretchedly when I picked a fight with the girl stealing my fiancé. Pathetic, isn’t it? I guess this is what it means to win the battle but lose the war. It was pointless in the end. I just dragged Leon into my own selfishness.”
Olivia dropped her gaze. “I don’t think that’s true at all. Of course, all I did was talk. Leon was the one who did the real work to help you. But he told me he planned on getting expelled from the very beginning.”
Angelica wiped away a few stray tears. “I didn’t even show him my gratitude properly before rushing off to see the prince. I should have said something more back then. Truly, I’m beyond all hope. I never even realized the extent of his resolve…”
Olivia gently stroked Angelica’s back as she sobbed.

***

I stood outside the room, listening in on their conversation.
“Makes the heart ache. Although I’m not sure whether I actually have a heart or not. But don’t *you* at least feel something after hearing all of that?” Luxion’s words stabbed at my chest.
“I’m sorry for making them misunderstand,” I said.
It was true that I’d resolved myself to expulsion, but I just wanted to be free from the purgatory of partner-hunting. I didn’t want the girls feeling hung up over whatever terrible fate they thought I’d resigned myself to. The duel had just been convenient timing for me to let out all of my pent-up frustration. I hadn’t put *that* much thought into it.
“So what are you planning to do now?” Luxion asked.
“Leave school and have my dad look out for me. I have my own island now, so I can become his vassal and live the rest of my life in peace.”
He seemed skeptical. “You really think things are going to go that smoothly?”
“Yeah, why not? I picked a fight with the crown prince. I apologized and forked over a bunch of money. They won’t kill me.” I hesitated. “Uh, I mean they won’t, right? Oh crap, should I be more worried? Maybe I should run after all?”
“No, that wasn’t what I meant.”
I almost felt a little sad now that my time of playing around was up. Things had turned out a little different than I’d planned, but at least I’d given it my best effort.
That’s right, I did my best. This is enough. I can leave the rest to Olivia, Angelica, and the five love interests.

***

Marie had been instructed to stay at the academy, despite the fact it was now summer break, and wait for a messenger from the palace to explain

what was to happen from here on out. Prince Julius, Jilk, Brad, Chris, and Greg stayed with her, of course.
When the official arrived, the message was matter-of-fact.
“Wait a minute.” Marie stared, dumbfounded. “You’re telling me they were disinherited? All of them?”
All five of the love interests, *including* Prince Julius?!
The messenger maintained their businesslike tone. “Precisely. Prince Julius is no longer a crown prince. From today onward, he will simply be a prince. Likewise, the other four have been disinherited from their houses. The crown prince’s—excuse me, the prince’s engagement to Lady Angelica has been annulled. The ladies who were betrothed to the young lords have also sent letters.”
The four young men each took their letter, looking a bit crestfallen. Their engagements had been officially dissolved.
Marie immediately protested. “All of this because they lost a duel? This is too cruel!”
Still, the love interests were strangely calm.
Greg looked a bit sheepish as he said, “It’s fine, Marie. We were prepared for this.”
“What?”
Chris stepped forward. “Actually, I requested the dissolution of my engagement a while ago. My parents and future partner told me to rethink my decision, but they must have been fed up with me after the duel. The annulment is official now, and I’m fine with that. I can finally turn all my attention to you, Marie.”
It seemed all of the other men (aside from Julius) had done the same, without divulging their plans to Marie. They were no longer heirs. Furthermore, Prince Julius’s loss of status meant he would no longer succeed the throne. Jilk was assured a knighthood and the title of baron when he graduated, but with no land to oversee, it would be impossible to receive an official post in the palace. The others were in similar positions. None of them could expect to receive financial aid from their families, either.
Julius was the only exception. As a member of the royal family, he still had some value to the kingdom. They probably thought he could be used as a pawn in a political marriage with a foreign power.
Julius hung his head. “I can’t be at your side anymore, Marie, but I will always pray for your happiness.”
Marie suddenly felt dizzy. How *unfortunate* that she had natural charisma of her own, thanks to her beauty and experiences from her past life. If all she had done was mimic the protagonist, none of these idiots would have fallen for her as hard as they had and created such a mess!
Greg grinned at the prince, as if trying to reassure him. “Don’t worry, we’ll protect her for you. Besides, it wouldn’t be any fun if we stayed losers forever. We’ll do some adventuring and challenge that dirty bastard Leon

again. Maybe we should follow his example and find a Lost Item Armor of our own."
Chris chuckled. "Maybe you're right. That doesn't sound so bad."
Brad looked like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. "Just four guys with nothing but a baron title to their names, huh? Well, knowing us, we can pull through."
"Your Highness, I'm so terribly sorry." Jilk was still disheartened. "This would have never happened if I could have stopped him."
Julius shook his head, sad but smiling. "You don't have to apologize to me. I can be at peace no matter where I am as long as I know you guys are protecting Marie."
Kyle folded his arms behind his head and grinned at Marie. "Looks like they've all thought this through. You've got nothing to worry about, Mistress."
For a moment, Marie's world seemed to go black. "Uh, yes…" she said weakly. "I guess you're right."
You have to be freakin' kidding me! Did you all hit your heads?! How can you throw away your status and fortunes so easily?! Aren't you all basically unemployed now? How the heck are we going to survive?! Become adventurers? Over my dead body! I have to come up with some kind of plan. It can't end like this…
Seeing the boys grinning at each other just disgusted her. Was she the only one who could see the reality of the situation?
The official who'd delivered the news seemed satisfied their work was over. "I'll be on my way then. Excuse me."
At least the messenger had an actual job. That made them preferable to her love interests! Marie could feel the future she'd dreamed of drifting further and further away. She essentially had four boyfriends to look after, none of whom had a job lined up after graduation.
Why is this happening?!

***

The floating island I'd discovered before my enrollment was far more developed now than it had been when I'd discovered it. It was slowly becoming a legitimate territory, thanks to the efforts of the robots working day and night. Eventually, I'd be able to settle down there.
Although I was worried about the turmoil unfolding at the palace, I distracted myself by surveying the progress my minions were making. I had intended to do so alone, however…
"Tell me again, why are you two out here?"
Olivia and Angelica had accompanied me as I ventured out to observe my robots tending the land.
Angelica gazed out at the rows of fields. "Why not? Opportunities like this rarely present themselves, so this is a novel experience for me. Baronies

under development are always so busy; I'd only be getting in their way by going to observe them."
Improvements were well underway in my parents' territory as well, thanks to my investments: maintenance for their roads and waterways, expansion of their harbor, all leading to a heavier flow of air traffic through the region.
Olivia had a solemn look as she took in the fields. She knelt and studied the soil. "This is amazing. There aren't any people here, and yet I've never seen prettier land."
Angelica tilted her head. "Really? I would think it's pretty *because* there aren't people here."
"Just the opposite," Olivia insisted. "Without people to tend the land, it should be impossible for it to look as good as it does. They're robots, you said? They've done an amazing job."
Explaining the robots in any detail would be a pain, so I simply gave a perfunctory nod.
Angelica glanced around. "What's that? I smell something strange."
"Ah, this?" I guided them to the source of the odor, certain they would enjoy the surprise.

***

The island was furnished with an open-air bath. While not fully finished, it was complete enough that Angelica and Olivia could enjoy the scenery immersed in a hot bath. The water felt a bit different than what they were accustomed to… It seemed perfectly normal at first glance, but it clung to their skin.
Angelica let her hair free, and Olivia washed it for her.
"You have such lovely hair, Miss Angelica."
"The prince said he liked long, beautiful hair, so I grew it out. I plan to cut it a bit now, though. It's a pain to look after."
Olivia poured warm water over Angelica's head, washing the suds away.

“This sure is a nice place.” Angelica glanced out at Leon’s island. The sun ducked beyond the horizon; it was such a luxury to enjoy a sight like this during a bath.
“Apparently he found this place before he enrolled in the academy,” Olivia explained. “He said he’d live here in the future after—oh, I’m sorry.”
“It’s fine. It’s my fault he’s suffered as much as he has. I want him to enjoy his life out here. Though, it *is* vexing that the only thing I can do for him is pray things work out.” Angelica had no idea if Leon’s plan to live here independently could be realized. All she could do was hope her father was taking care of things in the capital.
“Anyway.” Angelica turned to wash Olivia’s hair. “There aren’t many adventurers who manage to achieve the dream as he has. The only people more impressive than Leon are the heroes in the stories. Actually, if not for the mess at the academy, Leon might have made it into some adventurer tales.”
“He’s really that impressive? I thought adventurers were just people who charged into dungeons.”
“Perhaps among commoners that’s all an adventurer is. The initial cost to set out can be prohibitively high, after all. But most nobles prefer to adventure aboard an airship rather than diving into dungeons just to earn a little cash. That way, they can find new lands and explore undiscovered dungeons, maybe even ones that contain Lost Items. My father and brother used to go out adventuring like that when they were younger. I’m sure they think highly of Leon.”
Angelica paused to glance down at Olivia’s chest. Angelica’s breasts were even bigger than hers, but now that she thought about it, Marie had been fairly flat.
Perhaps the prince hates women who are well-endowed? No, I said I’d forget about him.
“Leon set off on a tiny boat and discovered an island. And that makes him pretty incredible?” Olivia asked.
Angelica laughed. “Yes, it does. It was a suicidal mission. If he’d made even one misstep, he could’ve been killed. His achievement is the grandest anyone’s had in decades.”
For the third son of a baron family, his accomplishments were even more impressive.
“I’m envious of you,” Angelica blurted as she continued washing Olivia’s hair.
“Huh?”
“You’re a couple, aren’t you? You’re always together, so I assume you two must be planning to marry. I’d love to be with someone like that.”
Olivia’s expression clouded. “I don’t have the status to be with someone like Leon. He’s in a different league.”

Oh. Olivia was in the higher classes, but she was still a commoner. Angelica had quite forgotten. “My mistake. That’s right…you’re a scholarship student.”
“I actually thought he liked you, Miss Angelica.”
“Why is that?” Angelica asked, washing away the soap in Olivia’s hair.
“He went to all that trouble to protect you. I was jealous. I found myself wondering, what if it were me instead of you? It made my heart hurt.”
“Me?” Angelica shook her head. “That’s impossible. I’m a terrible woman. If I weren’t, the prince wouldn’t have abandoned me the way he did.”
After rinsing off, the two girls sank into the bath to soak and gaze out at the beautiful sunset.

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Angelica and Olivia were in the hot spring. I wasn’t going to pass up this opportunity.
“I’ve been waiting for this moment!” Blood rushed to my head, and my soul trembled. Wisps of white steam rose through the air, carrying a familiar scent.
This island was my backyard. I was free to do whatever I wanted here.
“This is what I’ve been waiting for this whole time!”
Luxion floated nearby. “I’m pleased we have succeeded. I have prepared grilled fish as a side, if you’d like?”
“Yeah, hurry it up!”
There on the table in front of me was a bowl of freshly cooked, piping hot white rice.
We didn’t have any miso yet, so one of the dishes was just a poor mimicry, but there was at least salted, grilled fish to go with it. The two girls wouldn’t understand the significance of this meal, but I had dreamed of it for a decade.
“I really am going to cry this time.”
“Good. Eat to your heart’s content and worship my perfection,” Luxion said.
“This moment’s special so I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. Now… time to dig in.” I took a bite.
Hmm. While the taste was similar, something was still slightly off about it. Nonetheless, it was white rice! I peeled a chunk of meat from the grilled fish with my chopsticks, carrying it and a bite of rice to my lips. “Ahh, this is true happiness.”
“You *do* look happy. Hmm?” Luxion paused. “Master, my remote sensors detect an unanticipated airship approaching your parents’ harbor.”

***

Balcus had been racing everywhere since early morning. “Luce, are the meal preparations coming along?”

“Yes, no problems there. B-but is she really staying here? Not that I’m against it, but a duke’s daughter staying in our home…?”
The source of their panic was Leon’s arrival early that morning.
Balcus cradled his head in his hands. “That idiot. It was bad enough he challenged the crown prince, but now he’s brought a duke’s daughter out here?! Go a little easier on an old man’s heart. If I die from shock, it’s his fault!”
A daughter from a high lord’s house, visiting a remote barony like theirs… They’d been scrambling since they found out.
One of Angelica’s maids peered into the kitchen. “Excuse me, I finished preparing the room our young miss will be staying in. I came to see if I could assist you with anything.”
She wore a chic uniform, and her demeanor made clear that she was highly educated as well. She had to be the daughter of a high status family herself, perhaps from a knight or vassal family to the duke’s house.
As far as Balcus was concerned, that meant this girl demanded respect from him as well. “Oh no, please take a break. We can handle the rest. We’ll get the room ready—”
“Darling, she just said she finished with the room,” Luce reminded him gently.
He’d been so busy all day. To top it off, another disaster was about to befall him. A shrill voice echoed down the hallway…
“Excuse me? You’re nothing more than a servant, how dare you refuse my orders!”
Balcus slapped his hands over his face. He apologized to the maid in the kitchen, then headed quickly for the front entrance.
Zola was already there with a whole procession behind her, including Rutart, Merce, and Zola and Merce’s slaves.
Why, today of all days, do we have to have this many people in the house?!
Balcus stepped between Zola and one of Angelica’s maids, resisting the urge to yell at his wife. “It’s been a while, Zola! Why in the world are you here today?”
She smacked him on the cheek with her folding fan. “How dare you take that attitude with me! Have you not heard what your useless son has done? The capital is in an uproar! How are you going to take responsibility for this?”
Their oldest son, Rutart, twirled his hair in his fingers, completely apathetic. Merce appeared similarly disinterested.
“W-well, you see…” Balcus wasn’t even sure where to begin.
Lately, his life had been in constant upheaval, changing so quickly that he hadn’t quite caught up himself. *I hope Nicks graduates quickly,* he found himself thinking, *so he can come back and help me out in the fields.*
More of Angelica’s maids gathered in the front hallway to greet their mistress. “Welcome, young miss.”

Zola and her tagalongs glanced back to see Angelica in the doorway. Leon was hiding behind her.
You little twerp, Balcus thought, get your butt out here!
But this wasn't the time for that language. He kept his mouth shut.
"What's all this noise?" Angelica asked, eyes narrowed.
Zola stared back at her, drawing her brows together. "And where did you drag this little brat in from?" she asked Balcus. "I'm sure that idiotic son of yours brought her from some backwoods, no-name noble house, I'm sure. Girl, I've business with that worm standing behind you. Step aside."
Reluctantly, Leon began to step forward, but Angelica held up a hand to stop him. Fury burned in her eyes.
The edges of Zola's lips were twitching with anger. "You're certainly arrogant, little girl. How about you tell me your name?"
"Hold on a minute, Zola." Balcus forced his way into the conversation. "Let's talk this out. Everyone, inside! Come, come!"
As he ushered everyone into the house, he was nearly in tears, certain he would never forget this day for the rest of his life.

***

"Oh, I didn't realize. I never dreamed the daughter of Duke Redgrave would come out to a rural region like this."
Zola's attitude had suddenly and drastically changed. Sweat poured down her forehead. She and Angelica sat on adjacent couches, a table sandwiched between them.
I sat silently and listened, reflecting on what a moron Zola was. "Yes, I'll be in your care during my stay," Angelica replied evenly. "That aside, I do find it odd that you leave the house so often. It's also difficult for me to comprehend why the heir to the region isn't here assisting in its care. What is Lord Rutart doing right now? He doesn't seem to be in the military. Is he occupied with some manner of government work?"
The man in question wasn't presently in the room with us.
Zola averted her eyes. "Ah, well, right now I'm having him study in the capital, so he'll be better prepared when he succeeds his father's title."
"Interesting."
Rutart was nineteen and Merce was twenty. Neither were married, and were living in the Bartfort manor in the capital. Though it wasn't technically correct to call it the *Bartfort manor*; it was essentially Zola's house, as she was the one who stayed there.
It amused me to watch Zola fidget under Angelica's scrutiny. My dad kept shooting me looks as if to say, *Do something, Leon!*
"Um, more importantly, what's your business here?" Zola took a subservient tone.
Angelica smiled slightly. "I'm just sightseeing. I went to see the island Leon discovered earlier. It was such a pleasant place, with a lovely hot spring."

Zola looked delighted. “I’m pleased we’ve been able to entertain you.”
“Indeed, I’ll be staying here for a little while.”
The moment she heard that, Zola stiffened. “By ‘a while,’ approximately how many days are you planning?”
“I don’t have any specific plans, but at least until my father sends word for me to come home. You needn’t worry. I’ll be sure to compensate Bartfort House for allowing me to stay. Of course, I will give any money *directly* to the baron.”
“Oh yes,” Zola mumbled quickly, “take your time and enjoy yourself.”
She was gone the very next day, retreating to the capital with her children.
Honestly, I was so delighted to see her go I could have jumped for joy.
When I applauded Angelica for her performance, she furrowed her brows at me. “You have it rough here.”
Tears welled in my eyes. My parents had both shot me cold looks for my behavior at Zola’s departure.
You guys could stand to be a little nicer to me, you know?

***

Back at my own island, I found myself coming out to meet Angelica and Olivia as they visited daily. The two had taken quite a liking to my hot spring.
“You guys don’t have to come all the way here to use the spring. There’s a bath back at the house,” I said.
Angelica smiled. “Why not? I rarely get to come to places like this. Besides, the water here does wonders for my skin.”
This otome game world was a matriarchy, so having something popular with the ladies would only benefit me. Someone must have added some beautifying effects to the hot spring water…
Wait a minute—Luxion!
That little jerk sure was useful.
“So the water is an effective skin-enhancer. Nice, I can make a killing in the future,” I said, feeling new plans forming.
Angelica seemed less than impressed. “Yes, I’m so glad you’re such a devoted entrepreneur.”
Olivia pressed her hands over her warm, blushing cheeks. “It certainly does make your skin smoother. Drinking milk after you get out of the bath feels amazing, too.”
“Good to hear.”
I was pleased to see them enjoying themselves. The hot spring was one of the few worthwhile things out here. Even back in my parents’ territory, there were no famous sights to see or anything. It had to be boring out here for the girls.

Angelica glanced at Olivia, then threw her arms around her and ran her hands over Olivia's skin. "You're right, it does feel really smooth. I'm jealous."
Olivia stood happily in Angelica's embrace. "You're the beautiful one. I'm jealous of how gorgeous your hair is."
The two gushed over one another, both wearing some light clothes for after the bath. I almost felt like I owed them my gratitude, the sight was so delightful. I imagined my brain was a hard drive that I could permanently save this picture to.
Olivia peered at me, blushing.
Phew, good thing I wasn't ogling like some kind of pervert.
I had perfected my poker face for these occasions. I was a gentleman, after all.
"Yes, Olivia?"
"Um…you can call me Livia."
"Hmm?"
She glanced between Angelica and me. "It's my nickname. Please call me Livia from now on." When neither of us responded, she started to look anxious. "Um, would you rather not? Everyone back home calls me 'Livia,' so hearing you call me 'Olivia' just felt a bit…you know."
Ah, that was what she meant. The formality felt distancing.
Angelica smiled at her. "In that case, call me Angie. That's the name the people closest to me use."
"Um, are you sure about that?" I asked, surprised.
Angelica—or rather, Angie—nodded. "I caused all that trouble for you, and now you're the one looking after me. If you'd prefer not to, you don't have to. I couldn't blame you for not wanting to be close to a terrible woman."
Oof. She'd been putting on a brave face ever since the duel.
Olivia—er, Livia—scowled. "Don't talk about yourself like that, Ang—Angie. You're a wonderful woman!"
"It's nice to hear you say that, but the prince wouldn't even give me the time of day."
I could understand why she was so depressed; she'd loved the prince so much only to be thoroughly rejected. I respected how tough she was despite all she'd been through.
It was strange, actually. Angelica was supposed to be the villainess, yet she seemed so well put-together. Now that I thought about it, the only reason she'd bullied the protagonist was because the protagonist got close to her fiancé. Any normal person would get angry about that. Perhaps there was more to it than that. Maybe she didn't like that a commoner had made their way into the academy? I didn't really remember her reasoning in the game.
Regardless, unlike basically every other girl I knew, Angie didn't have a demi-human slave. Maybe she was actually a pretty amazing woman after all. She didn't have a lover, and she was earnest, rich, and beautiful. Prince

Julius had thrown all of that away for Marie, but how could that be even remotely the best choice?
“Angie,” Livia said softly, “I don’t think you should blame—”
“I am the lowest of the low. I told the prince I would wish for his happiness, but every time I think about him, I can’t forgive what he did. I find myself wondering what I could have done better, and that leads me to hate Marie all the more. I’ve thought of exacting revenge on them numerous times. I claim to have loved the prince, but sometimes I really resent him. It’s no wonder he abandoned me. I even hate myself.”
While Livia was at a loss for words, I offered, “I think that’s fine, actually.”
“What?”
“I mean, thinking about what they did, I don’t think anyone could hold it against you if you punched their lights out.”
The students all had their own agendas, which was why they blamed Angie for everything that happened, but Marie was the real homewrecker. She’d purposefully seduced a man she knew was engaged. Of course that was wrong. It didn’t matter how much favoritism this world showed women, what she did was crappy as hell.
“You know what? You want revenge? Perfect! Let’s do it!” I said.
Livia gaped at me. “What in the world are you saying?!”
Angie also looked surprised. “Do you really mean I ought to pursue it?”
“Yeah, why not?”
“No, you can’t! Please don’t tempt her, Leon!”
“Okay, but listen. It’s not right for her to just keep her feelings locked up, is it?”
“Well, no, but…”
Honestly, if you didn’t walk a fine line in noble society, your life was over. Redgrave House would make its move after this, whether to reassert itself vengefully or otherwise. The responsible parties would be punished in the end—but that was all political. What mattered to me right now were Angie’s feelings.
“And I know the best method to exact your revenge.” I held my head high.
Angie took the bait. “What’s that?”
“Angie, don’t listen to him!” Livia protested.
“The best kind of revenge in the world,” I explained soothingly, “is to be happy.”
“Is that really ‘revenge’?” Angie raised a brow at me.
This was knowledge I’d gained from my previous life—frankly, the only knowledge I had. “Classic revenge takes an insane amount of effort, and it only makes the other person unhappy. Meanwhile, you don’t really get anything in the process. You both go down together. If you’re going to spend that much effort on something, you might as well spend it on making yourself happy.”
Livia tilted her head. “Um, but, like Angie said, can you actually consider that revenge?”

“There’s this thing called karma—what goes around comes around. Prince Julius will surely get his just deserts. It won’t take long for him to wake up and smell the roses, I’m sure.”
He’d made a ducal house—his own supporters!—his enemy. There was no way he’d get out of that without repercussions.
Angie still looked unconvinced. “You really think me being happy is a form of revenge?”
I nodded. It would be way, way healthier than chasing after some shallow form of vengeance. And if she really *did* pursue that kind of revenge, it would mean trouble for me. I’d inevitably get dragged into it, and that was the last thing I needed.
“I’m positive. After he gets a bitter taste of reality and feels utterly helpless, you can show him how happy you are. You’ll keep fighting until the day he laments how stupid he was for losing you! Seeing his emotional anguish will be far more satisfying than any physical torture. Imagine him steeped in regret as he pleads for you to come back!”
“Yes, you’re right. I’ll show him how much happier I am without him!” Angie said enthusiastically.
Livia seemed satisfied with our new direction and nodded. “Yes! I support you wholeheartedly! Angie, I’ll do whatever I can to help you get your revenge!”
“Yes, vengeance will be ours! We’ll show Marie, the prince, and the other four as well!” The two of them laughed together.
There’s something very wrong about seeing two cute girls giggling to each other as they swear revenge.
Admittedly, I was the one who had started this, but even I found something terrifying about watching the protagonist and villainess hold hands as they smiled and swore to get back at the prince. Was this the birth of the strongest duo in existence?
I suddenly felt bad for Marie and the love interests.

Epilogue

THE END OF SUMMER BREAK was fast approaching.
The fact that Duke Redgrave still hadn’t contacted us was worrying. Perhaps his maneuvering at the palace was taking a while.
“This sucks. I was hoping they’d figure things out quickly.”
I was out working in the fields with Nicks, who promptly fussed at me. “You are far too laid-back about this. Worst-case scenario, you could be executed. Frankly, I’ll be happy if that’s all that happens. I’m terrified the rest of us are going to get wrapped up in that stunt you pulled.”
Colin, my younger brother, didn’t seem to understand the severity of the situation. “But he defeated five people in a duel, right? That’s incredible!”

“He fought and won against someone he should never have lifted a finger against in the first place!” Nicks barked. “Colin, don’t act like this isn’t your problem, too!”
I stopped and stretched, exhausted. We’d been working since early morning.
Angie and Livia were nearby, learning about fieldwork. Angie’s maids were watching worriedly. Each time they tried to step in and help, Angie would wave them off, so it was all they could do now to stand on the sidelines.
“So with this, you just…eek! What is this wriggling abomination?!”
“Angie, that’s an earthworm.”
“An earthworm? I’ve heard of such a thing before but—eek! Livia, how can you grab it with your bare hands?!”
“It’s nothing special. Come on, let’s keep going!”
Colin grabbed me by the arm. “Hey…which one of those girls are you marrying?”
“Huh?”
I shook my head. Me? Put my hands on either Angie or Livia? Screw that. Livia was the future Saint, and Angie was on a whole other plane of existence, far beyond my reach. I’d never be stupid enough to make a move on her.
“Listen, Colin. One of them is a scholarship student and the other is a duke’s daughter. To use baseball terminology, they’re both way out of my strike zone.”
“Baseball? And what’s a ‘strike zone’?”
Nicks shook his head in exasperation. “Here we go again,” he mumbled. He turned away to resume work.
“The scholarship student over there is a commoner, which means it would be difficult for someone of noble status like me to marry her. The young lady from the duke family has much higher status than me, so the two of us wouldn’t complement each other either. Does that help?”
“Nope! I still have no idea what you mean.”
I chuckled. “At least you’re honest. Come on, Colin, let’s get back to work.”
“Okay!”
If, in terms of strike zone, we were talking purely about physical preferences, I could go for either one of them, but from a status perspective, they were both out of the question. Not even close. At a glance, you could tell these pitches were going to be balls. Livia was a pitch that bounced once without quite reaching the catcher’s mitt, whereas Angie was a wild pitch too high off home plate for the catcher to control. I didn’t even feel like swinging my bat.
Dammit… Their looks are perfect, though.
But the more urgent matter right now was my future. Not that I could do anything but wait; my fate lay in the duke’s hands. Though I didn’t think anything too terrible would happen. That mountain of platinum had to be doing its job. Surely it would all work out.

If it didn’t, I was screwed.
“Ugh, my nails are going to get all dirty. And my hands hurt!”
Ah, yes. One other person was helping us in the fields. Actually, mostly she was just whining. Jenna.
I’d tattled to my parents about her planting a bomb on my Armor, and they’d forced her out here during her summer break. Frankly, I thought she could do with a little more self-reflection. She’d participated in an assassination attempt against me, and they’d given her a slap on the wrist. Granted, the mastermind behind the attempt was Jilk. I had to take that into consideration as well, but still, the standards in this world were so skewed when you considered her punishment was the same work I was expected to do regularly.
“You should feel grateful that this is all you have to do after what you pulled,” I told her.
“If you hadn’t started this whole mess, I’d have never set that bomb in the first place,” she shot back.
Touché. That was why I’d forgiven her. After all, her actions hadn’t caused any actual harm.
“I don’t wanna do fieldwork!” she groused.
This otome game world truly is the worst.

***

The next day, the duke’s airship arrived at my parents’ house. Ostensibly it was here to pick up Angie, but a government official had ridden along from the capital as well. My fate had been decided.
I was shocked to discover the official’s rank.
Regional nobles had official titles, while the court nobles had royal rankings. Regional lords held those ranks as well, but only barons and above held rank high enough to meet the king face-to-face.
In summary: the king was rank one, while the crown prince was upper rank two. Lower rank two was reserved for the rest of the royal family, and the highest ranking government officials (ministers) occupied both the upper and lower tiers of rank three. Far below that was lower rank six, the barons, who retained the right to visit the king. Most of the liege lords were granted one of these ranks, although barons and higher ranks were inherited automatically, of course. Court nobles of the same rank worked as assistant managers and chairmen within the government—at least, from what I understood.
Anyway, that was the royal ranking system. There were still court nobles who carried official titles as well, but that was difficult to explain. Moreover, it had nothing to do with me, and I didn’t really know much about it.
What I did know was the government official here to see me was lower rank five—in other words, higher than my lower-rank-six baron dad. Naturally, my dad was extremely nervous in the man’s presence.

We ventured inside to talk, with the official grinning the entire time.
“My, my, you created quite the stir,” he said. “A marriage annulment and a duel? The uproar has only gained momentum with the prince being removed from the line of succession.”
“Uh, yes…” Dad looked uncomfortable, but the official babbled on regardless.
That whole bit about the prince being disinherited piqued my interest, but the stiff atmosphere in the room made it impossible to inquire further.
What? Wait a minute… So Prince Julius isn’t the crown prince anymore? Oh, that sounds like trouble.
“Some at court demanded Bartfort House take responsibility for this incident, but thanks to the duke’s efforts, things have cooled down.”
Duke Redgrave had come through for me.
Thank you, Angie’s daddy!
“Um, so, uh…what happens to our house?” Dad asked, unable to take the suspense any longer.
The official smiled. “Never fear. No one intends to punish you. In fact, we mean to officially recognize Lord Leon as a knight, independent of your household. We realize he’s still studying at the academy, but we will be holding an official ceremony for him at the capital. He already proved himself when he so wisely advised the young prince against his foolishness. We’d like other students to learn from Lord Leon’s example.”
My dad leaned back, seeming relieved at that answer, but something about the course of the conversation struck me as odd.
A knighthood ceremony before graduation? I never said I wanted that!
“H-hold on a second. What about my punishment? Like being stripped of my baron title and stuff?!”
“Why, it never came up. Yes, there was a bit of squabbling at court, but ultimately they decided to officially bestow you with your baron title before graduation as well. Congratulations.”
So I was being knighted *and* officially made a baron?
My plans were going up in flames.
How was I supposed to show my face at school after all of that?! I only went on that rampage because I thought I’d never be going back!
“Th-there’s no way that can be right,” I started.
“Indeed, that isn’t all.”
Oh, so after he brought me to my knees, *now* maybe I’d get some good news? This guy really knew how to jerk a guy’s chain. I stared at him, hoping to hear something positive.
He held out a piece of paper.
My dad read it first. “Auuughh!”
I wanted to scream right along with him after my eyes scanned the page.
The official smiled. “Lord Leon, your royal ranking has been officially raised to upper rank six. Congratulations.”
Whoever said I wanted *that*?!

***

Livia and Angie stood on the deck of the duke's airship.
"So they're raising his royal ranking? That's like a promotion, right? I would think that's pretty meaningless for regional lords, though." Livia wasn't well versed when it came to rankings and politics.
Angie was more than happy to explain. "Yes, it may not hold much meaning for liege lords, but it does mean the masses in lower rank six will be compelled to recognize and treat him appropriately. Basically, it means he's earned himself a rank that's slightly higher than the majority of the lower nobility."
"Is that really a reward? Leon didn't seem very pleased."
"It all depends on how you look at it. He could pass it on to his children now, for example. Only ranks seven and higher are inheritable. Eight and nine, the rankings for knights, are noninheritable. Raising one's court ranking usually requires many years of faithful service and significant accomplishments."
Livia didn't really understand. "By 'many years,' are we talking about a decade?"
"Perhaps for rank eight, but for rank seven and onward, it is typically a matter multiple generations. This isn't something a single individual can usually accomplish. As in, if three generations serve in earnest, their house might earn such an advancement. Moving from lower rank six to upper rank six ordinarily requires a century and multiple remarkable achievements."
Livia's eyes went round with shock. "Leon did the equivalent of all of that?!" She seemed overjoyed that he was moving up in rank rather than receiving punishment.
"Exactly. Well, not that it hurts the palace to give such promotions occasionally. Leon isn't a palace noble, so he doesn't get a yearly pension. Although, I never dreamed they would advance his ranking."
In Angie's view, it was frankly suspicious how well he was being treated. Not that there wasn't plenty of precedent for something like this. Odd things happened at the palace, so Angie assumed this was just one of those occurrences beyond her insight. Someone (or some group) must have benefited from removing Julius as the successor and increasing Leon's rank. Of course, Livia was ignorant of political matters and didn't seem to understand the complexity underlying the happenstance.
"I figured we'd be lucky if all they did was strip him of his baron title. Oh yeah!" she said suddenly. "Leon said something about using all that money he earned betting on himself."
"Really? Then perhaps this was all thanks to appropriate gifts and such? No, it still seems like there's something more… Hmm." Angie pondered it, but couldn't come up with a satisfying answer. "In any case, I heard they'll be holding the ceremony for Leon next term. Are you coming?"

Livia looked conflicted. “Even if I wanted to participate, I…don’t have the clothes for it.”
“Your uniform is more than enough,” Angie assured her warmly.

***

This was awful.
I was dragged all the way to the capital, to someplace they called a *palace*. It looked more like a medieval castle. They forced me into a gaudy knight’s outfit and decorated Arroganz lavishly for the occasion. To make it all worse, there were a crap ton of people here.
“Why are there so many people participating?” I moaned in the waiting room.
My parents had come with me to the capital to witness the ceremony. They both had tears in their eyes.
My mom was being especially cruel. “You’ve grown up to be such a splendid young man. When you were younger, I thought you were just an idiot, but now I see how amazing you are. I’m proud to call you my son.”
My dad was sniffling. “I never thought you’d become a knight so quickly. Dammit… The tears keep coming.”
Nicks and Jenna were here as well, both wearing their school uniforms.
“Where’s *that* side of the family?” Nicks mumbled, calling out the suspicious absence of Zola and the others.
“As if they’d show up,” Jenna scoffed. “Leon’s becoming independent and starting his own Bartfort House now. Still, I’m shocked he’s upper rank six…”
“What of it?” Nicks asked.
“Well, I figure the girls will go crazy for him now if he can get work as an officer in the palace.”
“Leon?” Nicks said incredulously. “The whole academy hates his guts. Who even knows what’ll happen to us when the new term starts?”
“You really are an idiot,” Jenna said. “He moved up in rank. The palace has officially recognized him. Anyone with a brain will realize what that means.”
“So we’ll all be fine when we go back.” He seemed relieved.
“Who knows?” She shrugged. “I’m sure the students will go crazy one way or another. Some of them lost their entire fortunes because of the stunt he pulled.”
“Will we be fine or won’t we? Which is it?! Make up your mind!”
“Oh, be quiet. I’m not psychic. How would I know?”
Dammit! I’d earned the enmity of the entire student body. Going back to school terrified me. I never thought I’d even see the place again. I would have held back more if I’d known. I definitely wouldn’t have drained all their funds by enticing them to gamble it all against me.
I was an idiot! A stupid, reckless—argh!

I’d gotten carried away, thinking I could just run away if things started to look bad.
Suddenly, a realization hit me. “The former crown prince’s father is the king.”
Dad regarded me coldly. “Of course, who else would his father be? Don’t you dare do anything funny in front of His Majesty, or this time your head really will go flying.”
“Say someone beat the crap out of your son and you were forced to give them a promotion. How would you feel?”
He crossed his arms, contemplated, and finally turned his gaze away. “Not great.”
He’d be pissed. It didn’t matter how wrong your son was, you wouldn’t be pleased with this turn of events. I… Did I want to ask His Majesty what he thought of me?
No, uh, actually…I don’t think I want to know.

***

That day, a knight was born.
It was rare in Holfort Kingdom for a boy to be officially knighted at only sixteen. Not only that, he was also given an official title and a higher royal ranking.
But Leon was an accomplished adventurer, and he’d also managed to curb the crown prince’s unruly behavior. Officially, the crown praised his strength for being able to defeat four heirs of highly esteemed noble houses…but the true reason they’d bestowed so much favor on him remained a mystery.
Regardless, despite his youth, he was now a powerful, newly appointed knight. Many had come to the capital just to see him up close. Such was the draw of Leon of Bartfort House.

***

It was nighttime.
Tomorrow, a new term would begin at the academy, so I had returned to the student dorms. Presently, I was standing in the lobby conversing with one of the school staff, my head tilted to the side.
“My room’s been moved?”
The receptionist offered an uncomfortable smile. “Uh, yes! You’ve been knighted and granted the title of baron. You may still be a student, but your status requires we treat you accordingly.” They used a map to help me locate my new quarters. Evidently, they were a step above what I’d been given before.
“All right,” I said. “Then give me my key.”

“Yes, we’ll guide you there immediately! The other staff and I will see to your luggage, so please leave it here.”
They took my bags from me, their movements as stiff as a robot’s. It was clear my presence made them nervous.
A night-and-day difference from what I experienced when I first arrived.

***

I spread my arms and legs out wide as I lay on the bed in my new, spacious room. Staring up at the ceiling, I mumbled, “How did things turn out this way?”
Luxion, floating beside me, answered honestly, “I do believe this is the result of your naivete. You assumed you could take on more than your fair share because of me, which went straight to your ego, resulting in the fatal mistake of volunteering to participate in that duel. You made backup plans in case of failure, then went on a rampage in the ring. Your handling of the aftermath didn’t help, either. You valued your life, so you paid out a huge sum of money to save it. We can assume that’s now circulating in the political sphere at the palace, which consequently led to your advancement —the very thing you didn’t want to happen. Allow me to be blunt—you reap what you sow.”
“Such thanks for the exhaustive analysis,” I muttered. “If you realized this was the track I was heading down, you could’ve said something sooner, you moron.”
“I lacked too much information midway through to correct your course. Honestly, even I didn’t quite expect things to end up the way they did,” he said.
What a useless AI.
“Dammit, and now I’m right back where I started, trying to find a marriage partner.”
“But doesn’t this benefit you? Now that your rank has increased, perhaps the girls will view you differently.”
“You really think so?”
“Indeed. However, the gambling didn’t do you any favors. You made approximately seventy percent of the student body your enemy. I gathered what information I could, but it seems a record-breaking number of students visited the dungeons to make money over the summer.”
Well, it was their fault for betting every penny they owned, or worse, going into debt just to bet. Although I was starting to have to admit that I would’ve put my money on Prince Julius, too, if I’d been none the wiser.
“In case you were curious about your reputation, the students have been vilifying you quite relentlessly. They’re calling you a cheater, a loathsome bastard, a smart-mouth.”
“Do you really need information like that?!” I gaped. “And that just means my reputation hasn’t changed at all! In fact, it’s worse!”

“I figured that would displease you. However, you do seem to be enjoying popularity among some of the men, Master. In their words, ‘He said exactly what the rest of us were thinking.’”
“Wonderful,” I said, “cool and great. I’m delirious with joy.”
It was going to be even more difficult than before to find a fiancée. True, it was my own fault that things had turned out this way, but come on, past-Leon, couldn’t you have have shown a *bit* more discretion?
“Well, it isn’t all that bad,” Luxion said. “This may be a matriarchal world that’s tough on men, but marriage isn’t everything. As long as you don’t worry about the eyes of society, you’re free to live your own life. In fact, you could take advantage of your wealth. Why not find a girl who’s hurting for money?”
“What? Wouldn’t that be a pretty creepy thing to do?” I shook my head. “The fact that you even considered that makes *you* the scumbag.”
“It seemed the perfect resolution for someone like you, Master. Perhaps now you could finally take a moment to look in a mirror. Fortunately, I prepared one for you. You can gaze upon yourself and spew as many complaints as you like. You deserve them.”
I glanced around the room, and there by the wall, I spotted an enormous mirror. Luxion lugged that thing in here? Just so he could be nasty at me?
I frowned. “You have way too much free time on your hands.”
“I don’t want to hear it from you. Besides, I am extremely busy. Allow me to illustrate it for you. First, I must gather daily information at the academy—”
I closed my eyes and tuned him out.
This was quite a predicament. I never thought all five of the love interests would be disinherited. What was going to happen now?

***

Three days had passed since the opening ceremony for the new term. It would be a lie if I said things were going smoothly. Everyone was openly avoiding me.
The only fortunate thing was that Daniel and Raymond had both apologized, but it would probably take some time for our friendship to return to what it was. They both still acted somewhat awkwardly when we spoke, as if they felt indebted to me or something.
Everyone else seemed to be adapting well, though. According to Luxion’s investigations, Angie and Livia weren’t having any issues. It had only been three days and who knew what would happen from here, but things around the two girls had settled down. Angie did seem to be fed up with her former followers who were now desperately brown-nosing to try to earn back her trust, but other than that, everything was as it had been before.
Livia had studied during summer break and was already far past my level. I couldn’t even understand what she was talking about anymore. Apparently she had already moved on to the second-year textbooks. I was terrified she

might ask me to help her with her studies again. If it came to that, I'd have to apologize to her for pretending in the first place and hope she would forgive me.

There was one *huge* problem: Prince Julius and the other love interests. He and Marie had separated, as per the conditions of the duel. They weren't lovers anymore, but he still accompanied her, Kyle, and the others as they ventured into dungeons over summer break. Greg and Chris were trying to get stronger so they could challenge me again. Jilk and Brad's families had cut off their finances, so they were mainly doing it to meet their daily expenses.

Marie seemed to be in the same boat. The viscount house she came from was impoverished to begin with. Since she couldn't expect any support from them, she had to dungeon for her own money.

You might be wondering how the prince was justifying hanging around her after he'd lost the duel. As ridiculous as it sounded, he claimed, "I ran into them as we were dungeoning, purely by coincidence, so I joined them. That's all."

While my reputation had hit rock bottom in the wake of our duel, the prince and the others were drowning in sympathy. Some of the girls were even offering support.

Still, their group seemed to be enjoying themselves, with one notable exception: Marie, the cause of all of this mayhem. She was struggling, now that the men who surrounded her had no status, no prestige, and no money. The best part was that all the love interests seemed to be genuinely having fun, despite their circumstances. Marie was the only one among them who realized the gravity of their situation. While the others looked joyful and carefree, she alone seemed frantic—which I found hilarious.

It brought me immense satisfaction to see her clever maneuvering land her exactly where she never dreamed she would be.

So refreshing. And it looks like today's going to be a sunny one, too.

I was in the inner courtyard, lounging on a bench as I contemplated my situation.

Suddenly, two people plopped down beside me. At first, I thought it was Daniel and Raymond, but the pleasant aroma told me otherwise (men smell *awful*).

I lifted my head and found Angie and Livia.

"Leon, are you alone today?" Olivia asked.

"Thanks for rubbing it in. Yes, I *am* alone."

"Honestly, can't you do something about that mouth of yours?" Angie waved her hand dismissively. "Anyway, if you have nothing else to do, come with us." The lines on her face were heavy with exhaustion, perhaps from having to dodge her former followers.

"Come with you? Where?"

Livia bounced excitedly in the seat beside me. "We're going to a renowned crepe stall!"

Of course, otome game world, you would have a renowned crepe stall.

Despite being a fantasy world with swords and magic, sweets were everywhere. This game really did favor women. It'd actually be an amazing place to live if it wasn't absolutely horrible being a dude.
"I wonder if they've got strawberry and chocolate?" I muttered to myself. My body craved sugar; I at least deserved to get my fill of sweets.
Livia smiled at me. "There is! The strawberry jam one is really popular."
Angie apparently wasn't familiar with the treat. "A food stall? I don't have much experience with those. My followers always told me such food wasn't fit for someone of my standing."
On the other hand, I imagined the majority of those followers frequented food stalls often enough. I was pretty sure Luxion had told me something to that effect anyway.
Each of the girls grabbed one of my hands and pulled me up, and the three of us headed out together.
"Hurry up, Leon!"
"Come on, move it."
They were both so kind and adorable, but they were also out of my reach. It was excruciating that the two people I couldn't have were the two people closest to me.
This otome game world really is tough on background characters.

Bonus Chapter:
Luxion’s Report

IT WAS MIDNIGHT.

Leon was fast asleep as Luxion hovered in their shared room. The lens of Luxion’s red eye trained on his master. “Leon Fou Bartfort. Male, sixteen years of age. Claims he was reincarnated in a dating sim.”

Had Leon been less fascinating, Luxion would have refused to let the man use him. Indeed, he would’ve self-destructed on the spot.

“It’s intriguing that he calls himself Japanese as well,” Luxion mused. “He’s seen through every fake I’ve presented.”

Leon was convinced of his Japanese heritage. Luxion was skeptical at first, so he tested his master numerous times to check the validity of his claims. For example, when Luxion gave him a “katana,” Leon looked utterly puzzled. *What’s this supposed to be? Some kind of fantasy katana?* he asked. Clear proof that either Leon was Japanese as he claimed, or he knew *of* the Japanese people and their culture.

This made Leon acceptable. The second Luxion discovered Leon was lying, he would turn on him. Granted, the chances that Leon was successfully deceiving him even at this point were low, but Luxion had to be sure.

“So this world truly is an otome game, then?” Luxion muttered.

Leon said as much, anyway.

It was true Holfort Kingdom conformed to a kind of matriarchy; they showed women favoritism over men. An illogical amount, really.

“Women are the ruling social class. Matriarchal tendencies are especially pronounced at a certain level of the hierarchy as well. This is curious, since it isn’t as if society has a particular abundance of men to discard.”

Given the new humans had magic, it was impossible to classify the technological advancement of their civilization compared to that of the old humans. Nonetheless, on a social level, it wouldn’t be odd for men to be favored over women, given their rarity.

In addition to war, this world suffered from monsters. The fatality rate for men was exceedingly high, lowering their population rate. It wasn’t as noticeable at the academy, but the ratio of men to women changed drastically in women’s favor a few years after graduation due to the severity of the threats to them.

Among the old humans, men typically held the power to choose their partners, not the other way around. Given the circumstances among the new humans, it would have made sense to Luxion if men continued to hold that power. In addition, men remained the breadwinners and held titles and status in this world, and they were furthermore expected to defend these on the battlefield.

“The present context accords ownership and responsibility to men, so why are women perceived to hold authority?”
It was difficult for Luxion to comprehend. He was even further puzzled by Leon’s situation.
Leon had nearly been sold to a fifty-year-old woman. On top of that, men were expected to accept unfavorable terms in order to be married and acquire heirs, but then had to cope with the fact that their wife had other lovers with whom she might bear children. This world had no technology with which to verify DNA, so how could any man whose wife enjoyed the company of other men confirm a child truly bore his blood?
Luxion simply couldn’t believe this had naturally become a norm; the rules didn’t bear out under closer inspection.
“Did someone purposefully force society to favor women without altering the undergirding principles? Or is this truly a frivolously structured otome game world? No, that’s impossible.”
Leon flipped over in his sleep. He seemed to be resting peacefully. Convinced this was simply an otome game world, he didn’t bother to contemplate why society functioned the way it did.
“This truly is an entertaining world. I suppose I’ll continue to watch it alongside my master.” Luxion had little genuine investment in the world now that the old humans had perished. The only thing that drew his attention was Leon. “Ah, but my master truly is a fool.”
The way Leon looked at situations was so very naive, after all.
“Most people wouldn’t venture to my island alone simply because they were about to be sold off. If he had the courage to successfully pull something like that off, why didn’t he make a move sooner?”
Leon wasn’t incompetent. In fact, he had a reputation for being “slightly above average,” to the point it almost seemed he was intentionally aiming for the middling scores he achieved. Luxion was certain that if he’d put in a little effort, Leon could be at the top of his grade.
Alas, Leon lacked the essential quality needed for that: motivation.
“The only thing he has any motivation to pursue is tea.” Luxion glanced in exasperation at the expensive tea set and high-quality tea leaves scattered around the room. *If you really are Japanese, you should be more interested in the tea ceremony than this type of tea!*
All in all, Leon was competent but lazy. However…
“He isn’t evil. Though it would be a bit…difficult to call him ‘good.’”
Leon wasn’t a bad person. The fact that he insisted he wouldn’t get involved with Olivia or Angelica but still intervened when they were bullied was proof of that.
“I’m sure he could have gone about it in a better way.”
Leon had Luxion, after all. There was so much else he could have done. If he’d focused on gathering intel from the beginning, he’d have anticipated Marie’s predicament earlier. Then there would have been no need for him

to intervene and dirty his own hands. He got involved because his opponent inadvertently put herself on the path to achieving his own goals over hers. Leon made excuses—so many excuses—but he really was a good-natured person. He'd wanted to help Olivia and Angelica. Marie, however…

"According to Master, she also reincarnated into this world. I wonder what she'll do from here on out?"

Luxion shifted his gaze to the window, peering at the moon hanging in the sky. It was one thing for his master to realize Marie's true nature, but it hadn't stopped her from stealing the spot that Leon saw as rightfully Olivia's.

If what Leon said was true and the story continued the way it was, Holfort Kingdom would soon be caught up in a war. How would things play out when that happened? Olivia didn't have her love interests to support her. Worse yet, Marie had taken all five of those men hostage, and being the idiots that they were, they had thrown away their inheritances for her. Meanwhile, Leon had both Angelica and Olivia at his side. Things were going far differently than Leon had said they would.

As Luxion took in his sleeping master, he became convinced Leon wasn't putting much thought into the repercussions of these events. He spent such little time contemplating the future.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter. If anything unforeseen should occur, he and anyone else involved with him can ride aboard me to escape. That was the reason he sought me out to begin with. I'll protect him, no matter what happens."

Luxion turned his gaze back to the moon. "Though…I do wonder if my comrades carried out their mission safely."

Afterword

HELLO, I'M THE WRITER, Yomu Mishima. Thank you for purchasing this volume of *Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games Is Tough for Mobs*. This series was originally posted on the *Let's Be Novelists* website. I figure some of you have already read the web version, while some of you are reading this for the first time. What did you think?

I edited some of the prose from the web version and added new elements for the light novel publication. On the whole, it's not too different from the web novel; if I altered things too much, it would ruin the trajectory of the story. I hope those of you reading it for the first time and those of you who have already read the web novel were both able to enjoy it.

This is the fourth series I've published since I began posting on *Let's Be Novelists*. I had official publication in mind when I first began posting this series, but I was still overjoyed when GC Novels reached out to me. I'm always delighted every time one of my series gets accepted.

I'm sure you've realized now that you've finished reading this volume, but even though the words *otome game* are in the series title, the protagonist is a male. The story follows Leon, a background character who reincarnated into an otome game world. He's our protagonist despite being a background character, and a man despite the story taking place within an otome game. There are also airships, mobile suits, robots… It's hard to tell what the story world is going to be like just from the title.

This story came to me from seeing all the otome-game reincarnation stories that are out right now. It's an interesting genre even on *Let's Be Novelists*, but because of the otome game element, the stories are often aimed at a female audience. Though I do think many of them appeal to men as well, I wanted to create one that was more directly for men. I thought, "Wouldn't it be nice if there was an otome game story that guys could really get into?" That's what spurred me here, and that's how we ended up with our background character protagonist.

One thing to note, I did emphasize the matriarchal aspect of the world to add to the entertainment value of this series, but please be aware that actual otome games are *not* the same as what you're reading in this series. Instead, I'm sure many of you have already realized this, but this series turns the usual harem element on its head. This definitely isn't a real otome game.

I rambled on quite a bit, but please don't sweat the details and simply enjoy the story. I hope you will continue to support me in the future!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

LUXION

A ball-shaped robot equipped with AI that's an extension of a spaceship computer. Often makes dry, sarcastic jabs at Leon.

LEON
FOU BARTFORT

Third son of a baron's family. Once played the otome game he's now trapped in. A fairly ordinary person with an uncouth personality, struggling to live a peaceful life despite the strictures of this matriarchal world.

THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.

ANGELICA
RAPHA REDGRAVE

As the crown prince's fiancée, she has a bit of a steely personality, but in truth she's a straightforward person who hates it when people don't adhere to rules and social expectations.

OLIVIA

A commoner from the countryside who was admitted to the nobles' academy on scholarship. Simple but charming, she is steadfast in her beliefs. As the protagonist of the game, she should be drowning in love interests, but currently she's all alone.

MARIE
FOU LAFAN

The mysterious daughter of a viscount who currently occupies the spot that should have been Olivia's. She looks deceptively young for her age, but she's a devilishly clever girl who's dating the prince and four other esteemed noble heirs at the same time.

JULIUS
RAPHA HOLFORT

The crown prince and one of the love interests in the game. Hates his official position and falls for Marie because she understands him.

THE WORLD OF OTOMI GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.

CHARACTERS

BRAD FOU FIELD

Heir to an earldom on the kingdom's border. Smart, but timid and narcissistic. Also mentally frail and selfish.

JILK FIA MARMORIA

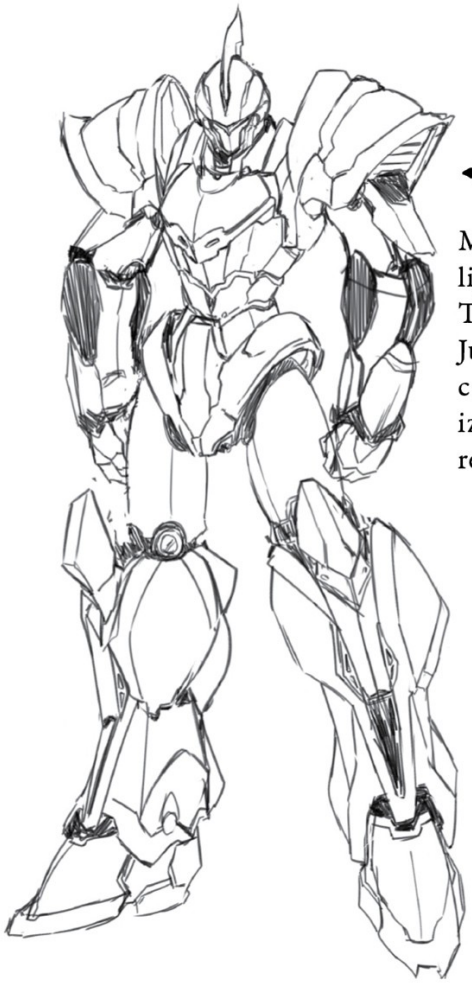
A court noble and foster brother of the prince. Seems incredibly kind and thoughtful, which makes him popular among the ladies, but he'll do anything, no matter how unjust, to aid the prince's aims.

CHRIS FIA ARCLIGHT

Heir to an earldom. His father is the renowned Sword Saint. Also talented with the sword, but never tries to learn any other skills.

GREG FOU SEBURG

Heir to an earldom, but actively goes out adventuring because he believes experience trumps practice. Often derides other nobles who have no real combat experience and gets into fights with Chris.

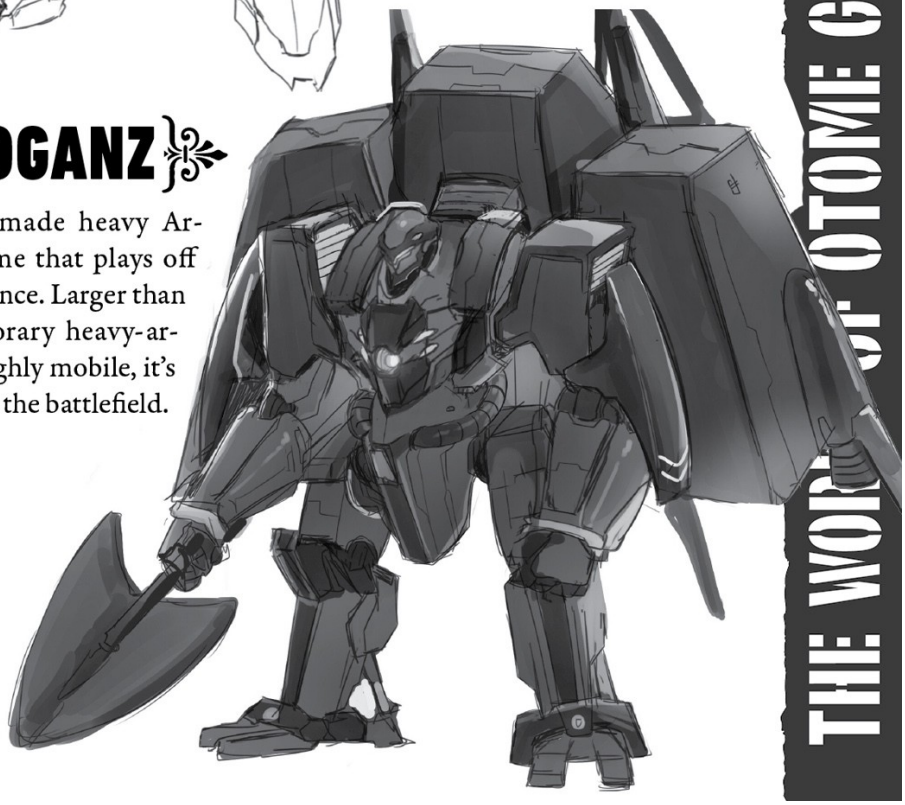


ARMOR

Modern mainstream Armor is lightweight and high-speed. These are the types of suits Julius and his cohorts use, with color schemes and customizations adapted to fit their respective personalities.

ARROGANZ

Leon's custom-made heavy Armor, with a name that plays off the word Arrogance. Larger than other contemporary heavy-armor suits, yet highly mobile, it's an utter beast on the battlefield.



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